

2017

From Cage to Coltrane: (Un)popular Music as Contemplative Practice

Kevin Healey
University of New Hampshire

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/joci>

Recommended Citation

Healey, Kevin (2017) "From Cage to Coltrane: (Un)popular Music as Contemplative Practice," *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*. Vol. 4: No. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/joci/vol4/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Contemplative Inquiry by an authorized editor of Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. For more information, please contact Jane.Monson@unco.edu.

From Cage to Coltrane: (Un)popular Music as Contemplative Practice

Kevin Healey

University of New Hampshire

For an upper-level Media Studies seminar, I developed two complimentary case studies that explore the relationship between music, identity, and contemplative practice. The first focuses on avant-garde composer John Cage, whose work incorporates ideas from Zen Buddhism, Indian philosophy, and the I Ching. The second focuses on jazz composer John Coltrane, whose “free jazz” approach harnesses the power of group improvisation as a technique for spiritual exploration. The juxtaposition of Cage and Coltrane’s work accomplishes a few important pedagogical tasks. First, it allows students to explore the ways in which the composition and performance of popular music serve as a form of contemplative practice. Second, it highlights the similarities and differences in various historical struggles for equality among sexual and racial minorities, and the role of contemplative practice in those struggles. (Cage was gay and Coltrane was African-American). Students are encouraged to draw connections to recent LGBTQ and racial justice activism. Third, it shows how the constraints of a consumer economy can enhance, but also hinder, the quest for spiritual meaning and authenticity. Such commercial pressures can impact the ongoing development of contemplative practices, shaping their long-term socio-cultural impact. If executed well, with proper contextualization, the lessons and in-class contemplative exercises described here may enhance students’ appreciation of music composition and performance as forms of contemplative practice with socially transformative potential.

INTRODUCTION

For an upper-level Media Studies seminar titled “Media, Religion, and Culture,” I developed two complimentary case studies that invite students to explore the relationship between music, identity, and contemplative practice. These case studies, which focus on issues of sexual and racial identity in mid-twentieth century United States, serve as early and prescient examples of “quest culture”—that is, the individualized and mass-mediated search for identity and meaning that emerged during the latter half of the century, and which continues today.

I have two goals in describing these lessons. First, I aim to provide some critical-historical context for contemporary scholarship on contemplative practice. Second, I intend to provide pedagogical tools that other teachers can use to familiarize students with the individual and social benefits of contemplative practice.

The lessons I have developed include a combination of lecture and discussion interspersed with multimedia-based exercises. The central pedagogical moments involve the juxtaposition of aesthetically jarring musical compositions with images of civil rights protests. As described below, I have structured these in-class exercises as a form of contemplative pedagogy. As Barbezat and Bush (2014) explain, contemplative modes of learning move beyond abstract lectures and discussions to include “an experiential sense of the material” which facilitates deeper understanding as well as a holistic integration of the material into students’ day-to-day lives (pp. 83-84). The exercises engage students on an emotional, intuitive level. But we connect with emotions for a purpose, not for the sake of entertainment or distraction. Intention matters, and here the goal for students is an enhanced appreciation of music composition and performance as forms of contemplative practice with socially transformative potential.

In these exercises I employ a combination of two contemplative methods: deep listening and beholding (Barbezat and Bush, 2014, pp. 137-158). These methods leverage students’ sense of hearing and sight, respectively, to catalyze insight and understanding. Before conducting the more sophisticated exercises described below, instructors may wish to review and perform the introductory exercises that Barbezat and Bush describe in their chapter on these methods. With regard to deep listening, key concepts include “mindfulness of sound,” which prioritizes individual attention, and “bearing witness,” which encourages understanding of others (pp. 139-140). Beholding, meanwhile, cultivates “a contemplative way of seeing” or a way of “being with images” that complements text-based learning (149). While the latter is linear and abstract, “when we look at an image, we see it all at once, as a whole” (149). Beholding thus includes an attention to one’s emotional and physical responses to an image, with the effect of encouraging “appreciation and relatedness rather than abstraction and distancing”—a technique that Cage himself advocated in articulating his views about art (pp. 149-150).

The first case study is focused on avant-garde composer John Cage, who is widely known for his “prepared piano” compositions and his 1952 silent piece *4’33”*. Cage’s work incorporates ideas from Zen Buddhism, Indian philosophy, and the Chinese *I Ching*. A gay man living during the pre-Stonewall era in the United States, Cage’s compositions and lectures reflect an effort to integrate spirituality and musical composition in the context of social oppression and discrimination (Katz, 1999).

The second case study is focused on jazz composer John Coltrane, who is highly regarded for his technical mastery and well-known for his controversial “free jazz” experimentation. His composition *A Love Supreme*, considered a masterpiece among jazz musicians, demonstrates his method of harnessing the power of group improvisation as a technique for spiritual exploration and expression. An African-American man living during the tumultuous civil rights movement in the

U.S., Coltrane's approach was "a highly spiritual social philosophy based on the potential of black music to alter social orientations and value structures" (Sidran, 1981, p. 140). His work also draws from African traditions, Indian philosophy, and his family's Christian background (both of his grandfathers were ministers in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church).

Though there are important differences between Cage and Coltrane, the similarity between these composers' lives and work provides an entrance point for a discussion about important shifts in religious and media institutions in the twentieth-century. In my seminar, I frame these two figures' work as indicative of the relative decline of institutional religion and the emergence of what Roof (1999) calls "quest culture" and the "spiritual marketplace." The former is an individually-focused search for meaning and purpose, generally outside the bounds of traditional religious institutions. Importantly, engagement with popular media and consumer culture plays an important role in this quest. The term "spiritual marketplace" thus refers to the confluence of religious practice and consumer culture, and the proliferation of choices for religious "consumers"—which practices to adopt, which congregation(s) to join, and which popular media to consume (books, music, television shows, etc.). I have found that these concepts resonate well with students, in all likelihood because the individual search for spiritual identity continues and indeed is intensified today in the context of personalized (and highly commercialized) social media networks.

The juxtaposition of Cage and Coltrane's work accomplishes a few important pedagogical tasks. First, it allows students to explore the ways in which musical composition and performance may serve as a form of spiritual practice that enables an experience of transcendence. This first task resonates well with many students who are fans of, or are at least familiar with, contemporary "jam band" culture—a musical genre emphasizing improvisation and the community-building aspects of live performance. Indeed, many popular bands like Dave Matthews or Phish, and their predecessors like the Grateful Dead, explicitly credit Coltrane's improvisational experimentation as inspirational (Cage's legacy also resonates with contemporary musicians, as noted in the sections that follow). While they are more aesthetically accessible and therefore more commercially successful than either Cage or Coltrane, today's jam bands are nevertheless similar in their eagerness to leverage the "transformational capacities of musical expression" to "enliven collective consciousness"—a process which usually emerges spontaneously through of interactions between musicians and audiences (Sarath, 2013, p. 103).

For these contemporary bands, as well as for Cage and Coltrane, the extensive use of improvisation encourages musicians and audiences to engage the tensions between harmony and dissonance, silence and noise. In fact, Zajonc (2014) argues that the effectiveness contemplative pedagogy hinges on the creation of

“conditions, practices, and capacities” that foster “the ability to engage with paradox or contradiction” (19-20). As discussed below, Cage and Coltrane refused the conventions of popular music and challenged listeners to question their own preconceptions about where music ends and noise begins—to hold both concepts in the same moment, if not to transcend such distinctions altogether. As one of my students wrote in a post-graduation letter, “the lively discussion about what qualifies as music” in our seminar was among the few lessons she “will never forget.” Such discussions are lively precisely because Cage and Coltrane’s musical irreverence was inextricable from their engagement with social struggles against homophobia and racism, respectively. As Orr (2014) argues, contemplative practices can “help one to abandon dysfunctional concepts and discourses, for instance, those of racism, sexism, and homophobia, but it can also help loosen the hold of habitual and conditioned responses to any sort of material—a poem, a social or political idea” (p. 33). In other words, by challenging students to rethink their understanding of what counts as music, the following exercises encourage students to bear witness to, and to empathize with, a range of social struggles with which they may be unfamiliar.

Second, it highlights the similarities and differences in various historical struggles for equality among sexual and racial minorities, and the role of contemplative practice in those struggles. As indicated in the lesson plans below, students are specifically encouraged to draw connections to recent LGBTQ activism across the globe (including, for example, the often violent backlash in Moscow and, more recently, Chechnya) as well as racial justice activism in the U.S. and elsewhere, from protests in Ferguson, Missouri to Black Lives Matter events in Canada and Europe.

Third, it shows how the constraints of a consumer economy (specifically the commercial music industry) can enhance, but also hinder, the quest for spiritual meaning and authenticity. Both Cage and Coltrane produced work that did not fit within the constraints of the commercial music industry. As described below, the anti-commercial spirit of their work is reflected in contemporary events like Cage against the Machine—a multi-artist “cover” version of Cage’s *4’33”* that functioned as a protest against the cultural dominance of reality talent shows like *The X Factor* (Service, 2010). Importantly, such commercial pressures can likewise impact the ongoing development of contemplative practices, shaping their long-term socio-cultural impact (Healey, 2015, pp. 956-958).

A NOTE ON CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

It is worth noting that both composers’ work draws heavily from non-Western traditions, raising concerns about cultural appropriation. Such concerns have served as the focus of extended discussions within contemplative scholarship. At the 2013 meeting of the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, for ex-

ample, attendees discussed the central theme of “Integrity of Practice” by asking how Euro-American practitioners might draw from Buddhist or Hindu practices in a manner that preserves their ethical and moral core. For his part, scholar-musician Ed Sarath (2013, p. 241) argues that an “Integral” approach to performance and composition will necessarily draw from African, Indian, and other traditions insofar as these traditions exemplify an “understanding of music as the manifestation of the primordial sounds that original deep in consciousness” (p. 241).

While Sarath (2013) focuses on jazz (and especially Coltrane), he suggests that Integral composition in any form will involve “rich syncretic tendencies” that move beyond established genres or traditions on the way to a global consciousness (p. 249). Nevertheless he acknowledges that such tendencies are ethically fraught. Cage’s ethnocentric characterization of Western classical music as the more “serious” art form from which jazz originated is a case in point (quoted in Sarath, 2013, p. 279). In fact, Cage specifically avoided the term “improvisation” in favor of “indeterminacy” in an effort to distance himself from what Sarath (2013) describes as “Afrological improvisatory practice” (p. 280).

Such concerns notwithstanding, I maintain that the central issue here is a not appropriation *per se*, but the ethics thereof (see Healey 2015b, p. 76). Too often, adopters extract the individual dimensions of contemplative practice while ignoring the socio-political implications of its overarching ethical philosophy. Without proper attention to the structural sources of suffering, contemplative practices may simply serve as stress-reduction techniques for a privileged elite. Thus some practitioner-critics describe misappropriation in corporate or military contexts as “a kind of asset stripping” that amounts to “taking the fruit while killing the root” (Healey, 2015a, p. 953). The key to maintaining the integrity of any practice is to acknowledge both its individual and social dimensions. While contemplative practices are effective in uprooting habitual thought patterns and cultivating selfless action among individuals, focus on such personal benefits must not displace collective attention to the transformation of social institutions whose dominant ideologies tend to entrench socio-economic inequality (Brazier, 2015; quoted in Healey, 2015a, p. 953). As Zajonc (2014) argues, the final goal of contemplative pedagogy is the cultivation of “moral or altruistic action supported by compassion practices” (p. 27). Without this moral dimension, such practices may simply “remain barren or even harmful” (p. 27). By focusing on their work as exemplary models of contemplative practice, I do not mean to suggest that Cage or Coltrane are beyond reproach. Their work is ethically fraught, as Sarath (2013) notes. Nevertheless, on the whole the body of their work served in their time, and has since served, to inspire attention to the social suffering and motivate listeners to catalyze social transformation.

THE EMERGENCE OF QUEST CULTURE

Before tackling the case studies of Cage and Coltrane, I begin with at least one full class period focused on the emergence, over the course of the twentieth century, of what Roof (1999) calls “quest culture” and the “spiritual marketplace.” I generally assume little knowledge on the part of my students with regard to American religious and cultural history, and therefore the first lesson follows a traditional lecture format. In addition to Roof’s work, Robert Wuthnow’s (1998) book *After Heaven: Spirituality in American Since the 1950’s* is also helpful, and I include it as recommended reading.

I begin this lecture with a summary of developments in the early twentieth century—namely the divide that arose between liberal Protestantism and fundamentalism. This early history appears counter-intuitive from the perspective of today’s progressive political movements, which generally regard market capitalism with justifiable skepticism. In fact, the Social Gospel movement of the early twentieth century was primarily an attempt to redeem market capitalism from within, viewing the work of churches through the lens of business enterprise and incorporating techniques from the emerging advertising industry (Moore, 1994, p. 213). Figures like Walter Rauschenbusch were among a “prophetic minority” of liberals who sensed that social progress was not at all inevitable and therefore sought immediate structural reform or “social salvation” (Hutchinson, 1976, pp. 150-151). Fundamentalism developed in part as a reaction to the liberal Protestantism’s emphasis on bureaucracy and rationality, focusing instead on individual salvation and the rejection of popular culture. Theologians like Richard Niebuhr tried to seek a middle ground, but the fallout from this division included a decline in attendance at mainline churches (e.g. Presbyterians, Episcopalians, United Church of Christ, and United Methodists). Many congregants continued to attend out of habit but felt disconnected from their churches’ underlying goals, or they shared those goals but felt that traditional institutions failed to express or fulfill them properly (Roof, 1999, p. 62). As Wuthnow (1998) suggests, religious believers moved from “dwelling” within traditional institutions to “seeking” spiritual experience and meaning elsewhere.

In some cases, new forms of practice such as Pentecostalism (which emerged in Los Angeles in the early 1900s) represented a return of emotion and an appreciation for mystery in religious practice. This is worth mentioning since the Pentecostal practice of *glossolalia* or “speaking in tongues” shares a phenomenological resonance with the “free jazz” experimentation of Coltrane. (As noted below, the latter consists of a combination of quickly executed melodic runs, along with cries or shrieks amplified by Coltrane’s saxophone). In fact, both Cage and Coltrane focused on creating cathartic emotional experiences, direct perception of the sacred, and a mystical (or at least mysterious) engagement with chance operations

and improvisation—what Cage called “indeterminacy.” Overall, the development of quest culture as described by Roof (1999, pp. 62-63) stemmed from a kind of “wholeness hunger”—an effort to overcome the fractured nature of modern life by reintegrating aspects of one’s life and self.

By the mid-twentieth century and beyond, conservatives and liberals alike wholeheartedly entered this questing mode—although in different ways. Evangelicals employed a creative use of music and performance in their church services, and focused on the individual’s relationship with Jesus as a source of personal salvation. A similarly individualistic and experientially-focused approach among progressives is evidenced by the emergence of the counter-culture in the 1960s. Psychedelic advocate Timothy Leary, Grateful Dead lyricist John Perry Barlow, and other counter-culture figures articulated an alternative form of spiritual questing that involved mind-expanding drugs along with aesthetically and politically transgressive music. Though conservative evangelicals and counter-culture liberals differed in their socio-political values, their approaches each centered on concerns about the individual self. Questions such as “Who am I?” and “What is my purpose?” became more pressing as individuals’ trust in traditional institutions (religious or otherwise) decreased and an emergent “spiritual marketplace” presented an overwhelming number of choices with regard to one’s beliefs and practices.

In this context, various “techniques of the self”—including drug experimentation, meditation, prayer, and (later) various self-help programs—came to characterize quest culture. This is an important point to stress, since Cage and Coltrane’s compositions and performances represent distinct techniques of the self that developed in the context of, and in response to, specific social problems (homophobia and racism, respectively). It is important to point out the potential pitfalls of an over-emphasis on the self. On the most basic level such pitfalls include the type of narcissism that Wilber (2002) describes as “Boomeritis.” On a broader level, these pitfalls include a collective neglect of social injustice. For example, evangelicals may find a degree of personal fulfilment in prayer, and counter-culture types may experience peace through embrace of Buddhist meditation techniques; yet to the extent that both groups are predominantly white and heterosexual, such personal experiences of peace are premised on the presence of socio-economic privilege. Here Martin Luther King, Jr. (1961) offers a distinction between “negative peace,” which involves a sense of complicity with the status quo, and “positive peace,” which consists of active but non-violent resistance to injustice (p. 51). This distinction is helpful in the following discussions of Cage and Coltrane, since both musicians challenge the emphasis on harmony in popular music and purposefully employ dissonance as a means to engage the listener.

At the end of my lecture on quest culture and the spiritual marketplace, and in preparation for the upcoming class session on John Cage, I ask students to

gather images online that relate to the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969 and to more recent LGBTQ activism. In the past, I have included images of anti-gay violence such as the targeting of men and women in Russia in the lead-up to the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014, or the backlash against gay pride marchers in Jerusalem in 2015. Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election sparked a wave of LGBTQ marches, including a rally outside New York City's Stonewall Inn in early 2017, as well as a multi-city march that summer coinciding with the one-year anniversary of the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida. Images from public memorial events may also work well if students are hesitant to choose more violent images. I collect and curate these images, setting aside at least a dozen for use in an in-class exercise described below.

JOHN CAGE'S QUEER SILENCE

Introductory Lecture

In preparation for our discussion about John Cage, I ask students to read Katz's (1999) article, "John Cage's Queer Silence; Or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse." Katz's article discusses the relationship between Cage's sexuality, his Buddhist practice, and his compositional approach. I've also assigned Clarkson's (2001) chapter "The Intent of the Musical Moment: Cage and the Transpersonal," but the chapter is quite long and complex. I recommend reading Clarkson's chapter in preparation for lecture, and possibly listing it as supplemental reading for students.

I begin this lecture by describing the general arc of Cage's work. His early work was more rigorously composed—it used unconventional sounds and some improvisation, but it also employed detailed notation. His later work is characterized by unconventional sounds and a lack of notation, leaving room for improvisation or what he called "indeterminacy." As examples of his earlier work, I like to show the video for his 1960 piece *Water Walk*. I also show an image (or several) of a "prepared" piano. As an example of an earlier composition with prepared piano, I usually show a video for "Sonatas and Interludes," which Cage composed between 1946 and 1948. The latter composition draws from Indian philosophy, and represents Cage's notion that the purpose of music is to sober and quiet the mind, rendering it susceptible to "divine influences" (quoted in Clarkson, 2001, pp. 78-79). This view is illustrative of the various "techniques of the self" that emerged as part of quest culture, and is similar to Coltrane's approach as well.

As Cage's approach developed over time, he became more interested in the moment of listening than in compositions as such. He wanted music to have an unpredictable outcome, and therefore he embraced experimental music while others tended to reject it (Clarkson, 2001, p. 66). Cage wanted the performer

to be open to the spontaneous flow of creativity rather than simply re-creating what has been written. He related this to his Zen studies, commenting later that “When each sound is the Buddha, then the performer becomes likewise” (quoted in Clarkson, 2001, p. 66). In this way performances serve as a type of meditation.

Importantly, Cage’s work is a critique of conventional musical formats. Conventional music structures represent and reinforce conventional ideas, meanings and values. Cage’s eventual shift toward chance operations opened the door to what is beyond conventional language. As one student wrote, Cage’s methods produced “an almost unheard of sound.” In this way, he intentionally blurred the line between life and art, making music an opportunity for “experiences that contribute to changing us” and “particularly, to changing our perceptions” (quoted in Clarkson, 2001, p. 68). This point is worth underscoring, since it is remarkably similar to Coltrane’s approach.

Before Cage encountered Buddhist ideas, his interest in chance operations led him to an interest in a traditional Chinese text called the *I Ching*. His engagement with this text contributed to his emerging goal of healing the mind through engagement with Eastern philosophies (Clarkson, 2001, p. 78). In using the *I Ching*, Cage remarked that he wanted to “liberate sounds from the constraints of tradition” as a means to “strive for a spiritual transcendence” (quoted in Clarkson, 2001, p. 78). He used that text to compose in an open-ended way that resulted in dissonant and random-sounding pieces. His piece *Music of Changes* (1951) is exemplary.

With some of the context describe above, but before explaining the purpose of such pieces in detail, I like to play an excerpt from *Music of Changes* and solicit the students’ initial reactions. Such pieces are unusual and jarring, and students usually find them enigmatic and even disturbing. This is good! As a point of contrast (and apropos the comments above regarding conventional musical forms), I also play part of Nat King Cole’s (1951) “Too Young,” which was the most popular song at the time. The contrast between these two pieces could not be clearer, and students typically cannot imagine why anyone would listen to a composition such as Cage’s. Again, it’s good for students to be confused at this point. The hetero-normative themes in “Too Young” will be an important point of reference as the discussion later turns toward Cage’s sexuality.

At this point I like to explain a bit further the purpose of Cage’s compositional approach. This requires further discussion of his engagement with Buddhism, and also with Jungian psychology. Cage drew from Jung’s writings and Jung, in turn, linked his ideas about dreams and the unconscious to ideas in Zen Buddhism and Taoism (Clarkson, 2001, p. 81). From this network of ideas, Cage structured his compositions and performances as techniques for engaging the unconscious and, in the process, transforming the individual so as to “guide the individual on the

path to wholeness,” in Clarkson’s words (2001, p. 82). In lecture, I connect this idea to the discussion of “wholeness hunger” from the previous session’s reading of Roof (1999).

This discussion of the psychological and spiritual purpose of Cage’s composition fits well with the more accessible (for students) article by Katz (1999), which specifically addresses Cage’s sexuality. As Katz (1999) notes, Cage turned not to psychoanalysis or therapy *per se*, but to Zen as a means of working through the pain of being a closeted gay man in the mid-twentieth century U.S. In this context, Zen practice allows one not to repress or reject pain and anxiety, but to acknowledge it and then move beyond it.

Contemplative Exercise #1: Music of Changes

At this point, I remind students of their homework assignment, which was to collect images of LGBTQ activism from Stonewall to the current day. I explain that the class will listen to Cage’s *Music of Changes* again, but this time against the backdrop of these images of social protest, some of which include confrontations with police or counter-protestors. (No sophisticated software is necessary. I simply play the composition via YouTube or an MP3 saved on my laptop, and then click through a folder full of the images students have collected. If you are more ambitious, you could piece together a PowerPoint or video slide show beforehand, but I enjoy the interactivity of clicking through the images in the moment.) Since students have collected the images themselves, they have a sense of investment and involvement in the listening and viewing process. This is a key moment in the class, and I regard it as a form of contemplative pedagogy. As described above, the goal in this combined method of deep listening and beholding is not for students to take notes or think conceptually about these ideas, but—in the manner of Cage’s performances—to allow themselves to experience an intuitive, emotional response to the juxtaposition of the music and images. When set up properly, students will experience an “Ah-ha!” moment where they understand in a new way the significance and purpose of Cage’s work. As Zajonc (2014) notes, the preliminary work of mental preparation (through reading and lectures) and incubation (through discussion and reflective essay-writing) lays the groundwork for a moment of illumination “at which a flash of insight appears” (p. 24).

I allow time for an informal response and discussion after listening and viewing. In this discussion, I lead students to an understanding of the relationship between Cage’s music and the social struggle of LGBTQ individuals. Cage’s music was jarring and dissonant, unlike Nat King Cole’s smooth and silky voice, because his experience as a gay man was full of tension and pain. The violent sounds and imagery that students have experienced represent the repressed or “shadow” elements of collective, hetero-normative consciousness, which is symbolized by

the slick veneer of harmony and normalcy in Cole's "Too Young." As one student explained in a reflective essay, musicians like Cole were talented for sure, but were nevertheless guilty of "skating over the Civil Rights movement that was happening." Another student notes that, by contrast, Cage "looked at the false representation of peace in the universe and tried calling attention to it."

Contemplative Exercise #2: 4'33"

The next and final piece of this session is to experience a performance of Cage's silent piece, 4'33", which many regard as his signature composition. Again, this requires some set-up, and here it makes sense to draw directly from Katz's (1999) article. Cage's criticism of the other avant-garde art of his time (especially abstract expressionism) was partly a reaction against the hetero-normative masculinity of avant-garde culture. As exemplified by the *Music of Changes* exercise described above, Cage perceived that his surrounding culture excluded certain voices and privileged others. Whose voices are not being heard? Are they suffering? What is the nature of their suffering? Gradually, Cage began to employ silence as a compositional strategy for engaging these unheard voices. Interestingly, as Katz (1999) notes, his silence made him stand out, and in this sense he was not trying to "pass" in a heterosexual culture. Katz (1999) argues that Cage's silence was an expression of his closeted homosexuality, but it was also an active form of resistance. "Silence" in this broader, more philosophical sense represents the cultivation of equanimity in the face of social oppression—an inner silence or peacefulness that the individual musters for strength regardless of the noise around him or her.

The piece 4'33" epitomizes this philosophical perspective. Tellingly, Cage originally planned to name the piece "Silent Prayer." Unlike much popular music, it requires active participation on the part of the listener. The experience of listening is different for each performance, because the content of the piece (the sounds that one hears) depends entirely on the particular context in which it is performed. As one of my students wrote in a subsequent essay, Cage's piece shows that "there is really no such thing as absolute silence." The performance of the piece thus creates an opportunity for reflection and a cultivation of equanimity despite (or through) the "noise" of one's shifting environment. In fact, the inspiration for the piece was Cage's realization that there is no such thing as silence in the outside world: even in an anechoic chamber, devoid of all noise, one can still hear one's own nervous and circulatory systems in operation. The possibility of silence or equanimity lies within the listener, and its cultivation has important social implications. This idea resonates well with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s (1961) discussion of "positive peace" as described earlier.

There are a number of performances of 4'33" available online. I prefer to use the BBC Symphony Orchestra's version conducted by Lawrence Foster in 2004.

It is important to get students to take the experience seriously, and to get into the right frame of mind by focusing not just on the video but on the sounds inside (and outside) the classroom. As noted above, you may wish to conduct one of the introductory “deep listening” exercises described by Barzabat and Bush (2014, pp. 139-145) before the in-class exercise. Along the same lines as those exercises, I ask students to keep certain questions in mind, such as: What do I hear? Do I hear my own thoughts? Do I hear others speaking or breathing? Am I uncomfortable? Why or why not? As with the *Music of Changes* piece, I allow time for an informal response and discussion afterwards.

Cage against the Machine

Finally, I conclude the discussion of Cage by distributing copies of an article published in *The Guardian* in 2010 titled “Cage against the Machine – enjoy the silence.” The piece reflects on a group of artists who recorded a cover of “4’33” as a protest against the undue influence of Simon Cowell’s *The X Factor*, and more generally against the impact of rampant commercialism within the music industry. I ask students read the article, after which we watch a video of these artists’ recording of Cage’s piece (available on YouTube). I follow the viewing with a discussion of the contemporary music industry, asking students to assess the legitimacy of these artists’ critique and their chosen strategy of protest.

At the end of the lecture on Cage, and in preparation for the upcoming class session on John Coltrane, I ask students to gather images online that relate to the Watts riots in Los Angeles in 1965, the Selma to Montgomery marches (also in 1965), and to more recent protests (from the Rodney King riots in 1992 to the protests in Ferguson, Missouri after the shooting death of Michael Brown in 2014). As in the previous exercise, I collect these images and curate them in preparation for the third contemplative exercise, described below.

JOHN COLTRANE’S MUSIC OF THEOPHANY

Introductory Lecture

As mentioned above, Coltrane’s life and compositional style are similar to Cage’s in some important ways. Coltrane was an African-American jazz composer and performer whose career reached its apex at the height of the civil rights movement in the U.S. Like Cage, Coltrane employed improvisational techniques and dissonant aesthetics to communicate a deeper truth about the realities of life in mid-twentieth century America. This theme is covered very well in McDonald’s (1995) article “Traning the nineties, or the present relevance of John Coltrane’s music of theophany and negation.” I recommend assigning this article as required reading.

It's important to provide some historical context for Coltrane's work, and for this purpose I find Ben Sidran's (1981) *Black Talk* helpful. The emergence of "free jazz" in the 1960s requires some explanation. Echoing the earlier class discussion on quest culture, with its emphasis on emotion, African Americans in Coltrane's time began to use music to channel emotion, energy and thought into constructive social change. Free jazz, which focuses on self-expression, individuality, and creativity, developed as a means to strengthen African-American self-identity in a time of crisis.

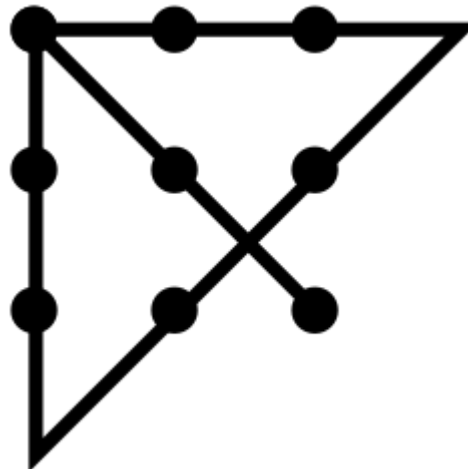
Early ventures in the direction of free jazz include, notably, Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* (1959), which employed "modal" compositions (simple chord progressions based on a small number of scales or "modes") that allowed performers greater harmonic flexibility. I like to play a short segment of "So What" to demonstrate this approach, since the piece begins with a recognizable theme but then provides room for each performer to improvise over extended sections that consist of a clear alternation between two easily identifiable modes. If time permits, it's also helpful to play a short segment from Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* (1960), which took the approach to much greater lengths. Coleman's piece exemplifies the notion that, as Sidran (1981) suggests, the abandonment of traditional harmonic structures represents "the striving for personal freedom through complete collective catharsis" (p. 137). In both cases, I stress how these approaches are different from other popular music: namely, while most popular music requires the performers to focus on the composition itself in a highly structured manner, these "free" compositions require performers to focus on each other—to provide a generous, intuitive listening that allows other performers to explore and create spontaneously (see Sarath, 2013).

Though Davis and Coleman are important, Coltrane's free jazz experimentation was unique in its explicit integration of spiritual practice and philosophy. This aspect of his work is perhaps not surprising, given that both of Coltrane's grandfathers were ministers in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. A spiritual longing or quest characterizes much of Coltrane's later work, often resulting in pieces that (like Cage's work) defy traditional harmonic norms by embracing dissonance and even guttural shrieks and cries. It's important to note that Coltrane had achieved a technical mastery of his instrument by the time he began to experiment with more controversial forms. The album *Giant Steps* demonstrates such mastery, and it is worth playing a short section of the composition of that name so students are clearly aware of his technical ability. In fact, *Giant Steps* marks a key moment in Coltrane's evolution since it represents an attempt at "playing the old forms into the ground—destroying them from within," according to Sidran (1981, p. 138). Like Cage, Coltrane felt that traditional harmony was more than aesthet-

ically limiting—in fact, traditional harmonic structures represent a kind of “lie” along the lines of King’s notion of “negative peace.” (This is the same insight that had led Theodor Adorno to remark famously that “dissonance is the truth about harmony.”) In other words, traditional harmony represents the culturally-imposed normative limits not only on musical aesthetics but on the very structures of thought available to citizens. For this reason, as McDonald (1995) argues, Coltrane designed his compositions and performances as strategies (techniques of the self) that allow performers and listeners alike to experience a spiritual revelation or “theophany.” Like those cultivated through Cage’s performances, such experiences had distinct implications for the social problems of the time. As Sidran (1981) suggests:

[T]he long form improvisation and rhythmic intensity of Coltrane... provided a perceptual orientation that allowed whites and blacks alike to break out of old thought patterns and, occasionally, to reexamine the limitations of their personal freedom in terms of cultural suppression. (p. 151)

To demonstrate this concept, I present the well-known “nine dots” puzzle, whose solution requires non-conventional thinking. Draw nine dots on the blackboard or whiteboard, arrange in a perfect square. Ask for a volunteer. The puzzle or task is to connect all nine dots by drawing four straight lines without lifting the chalk or marker from the board. Most students have not seen this puzzle before, and most cannot figure out the answer when asked to do so. The puzzle and its solution are below:



(Wikimedia Commons)

Most students try to solve the puzzle by remaining within the imagined borders of the nine-dot square. Solving the problem requires “thinking outside the box.” While this puzzle is often used to promote creative thinking within corporate contexts, here I use it to suggest that the problems of racial injustice require original—even transgressive—thinking that challenges established norms. African Americans at this time sought to think outside the “box” of racial prejudices and stereotypes. Coltrane intended that his compositions would “create the initial thought patterns that can change the thinking of people” (quoted in Sidran, 1981, p. 140). The space of listening that the performers provide to *each other*, and that audiences provide to the performers, is an important element in this process. Given the important influence of Coltrane’s approach on successive generations of musicians—black and white alike—Sidran (1981) suggests that Coltrane was “a visionary in the communications revolution” (p. 140).

Contemplative Exercise #3: The Sounds of Protest

Recall that students’ homework assignment was to collect images of the Watts riots in Los Angeles in 1965, the Selma to Montgomery marches (also in 1965), and to more recent race-related violence and protests (such as the Rodney King riots in 1992 or the protests in Ferguson, Missouri after the shooting death of Michael Brown in 2014). I explain that the class will watch a 1965 performance of Coltrane’s piece “Naima” against the backdrop of these images of protest and counter-protest. I write on the board a few of the key moments that occurred around the time of this performance: the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, and 1965 was marked by the assassination of Malcolm X, the Watts riots, the Marches from Selma to Montgomery, and the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

I like to use the video for the 1965 performance of *Naima* not only because it occurred in tandem with these other events, but because it is a clear example of a composition that moves between a recognizable theme and freer improvisational sections. As in the Cage exercises, this video and image collage integrates the deep listening and beholding methods described by Barbezat and Bush (2014, pp. 137-158) and it is a key moment in the class. It is worth reiterating to students that the goal of the exercise is not to take notes or think conceptually about these ideas, but—in the manner of Coltrane’s performances—to allow themselves to experience an intuitive, emotional response to the juxtaposition of the music and images. I typically allow students to watch the first portion of the video (including McCoy Tyner’s piano solo) to get a sense of the performance before I begin displaying the images that they have collected. I point out the main theme as well as when the performers move into their improvisational sections. When Coltrane’s solo begins, I start to display the images that the students have collected.

As Coltrane's solo becomes more intense—especially with its occasional shrieks and cries—the juxtaposition with the violent images is provocative and moving. Students may not experience a “theophany” *per se*, but hopefully an epiphany of sorts that will deepen their understanding of Coltrane's work and its social significance. In a follow-up essay, one student noted that Coltrane's music “sounded angrier” than Cage's and that, by contrast, “you could really hear the political unrest in his music.” When I conducted this exercise at Western Connecticut State University several years ago, another student had a particularly strong reaction. After viewing the performance and images, he commented, “I grew up in Jamaica, so I'm mostly not familiar with the experience of African Americans in the United States. But hearing that music, and seeing those images, I feel like I understand much better how those people felt.”

CONCLUSION: THE RETURN OF THE PROTEST SONG

Coltrane's performances served as a form of protest music long before the legendary events at Woodstock in 1969. They were influential and garnered attention, yet like Cage's compositions they were not commercially viable. They simply did not fit within the constraints of the mainstream music industry, or even local music economies. As jazz bassist Buell Neidlinger explained, “bar owners weren't interested in this [type of performance], because if there's one thing they hate to see, it's a bunch of people sitting around open-mouthed with their brains absolutely paralyzed by the music, unable to call for the waiter” (quoted in Spellman, 2004, p. 8). As one of my students explained, Coltrane's use of dissonance “encouraged deeper thinking rather than [mere] pleasure.” In a sense, free jazz was “a profound attempt to win creative autonomy” in the context of a highly restrictive commercial industry—an attempt to “use music to build a new culture” (Attali, 1985, p. 138). To this end, the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians was founded in Chicago in 1965. It was a cooperative comprised of about thirty black musicians, and its goal was specifically to “fight against the dictatorship of the club owners, record companies, and critics,” according to legendary trumpeter Archie Shepp (quoted in Attali, 1985, p. 138). For the most part, these attempts at forging a new economic model for socially and aesthetically transgressive music failed (Attali, 1985, p. 140).

Together, the case studies of Cage and Coltrane provide an opportunity for students to understand the constraints of the commercial music industry, and how such constraints impact the ability of performers (and audiences) to harness the transformative potential of music. Moreover, these lessons allow students to make connections between individual contemplative practice and collective struggles for social justice. These connections are particularly relevant given the high-profile

deaths of Treyvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and others, along with the street protests and marches held in response to the election of Donald Trump. Articles such as Tam's (2014) "Artists protest through song in the wake of Ferguson shooting" or Tillet's (2015) "The return of the protest song" underscore the continuing importance of music in struggles for social justice, as well as the limitations that musicians face despite the new avenues afforded by digital media. More recent articles in sources like *Los Angeles Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *USA Today* examine musicians' responses to the Trump presidency.

My current experience in conducting these exercises is driven in large part by the demographics of the student body at University of New Hampshire, which is disproportionately white and relatively affluent compared to the general U.S. population. My goal, given that context, is to get students to think about issues of social and racial justice they might not otherwise encounter personally, or might not feel compelled to attend to civically. I have been heartened to see evidence in students' written comments that these exercises have begun to spark a nascent social consciousness. Writing about the civil rights movement at the time of Coltrane's performance, for example, one student wrote that "the stereotypical white American may have pretended they were living in a harmonious society, they were far from it. Coltrane's music purposely often times turned its back on harmony with the use of dissonance to show that there is no such thing as true harmony."

Interestingly, my students' strongest reaction is often directed against the contemporary musicians described above in relation to the "Cage against the Machine" recording. After viewing the video of these musicians' recording of Cage's "4'33", wherein the musicians can be seen dancing or gesturing lightheartedly and perhaps mockingly, my students castigated the musicians as "hipsters" who were too self-centered to remain focused and serious about the performance. I believe their response indicates that the students had taken the idea of contemplative practice seriously, and were expressing a deeper frustration with their Millennial peers. For this set of students, this discussion was a key moment in which the group established a sense of solidarity and commitment to a shared set of concerns.

Students at other institutions may have widely different reactions depending on the demographics of the study body and the surrounding region, so instructors may wish to tailor follow-up discussions accordingly. I recommend following up on these exercises by providing students with resources they can engage personally, or through campus student organizations, to forge connections between contemplative practice and social justice activism. Recent publications by Berila (2016) and Bhattacharya and Gillen (2016) provide helpful exercises and conversation topics to this end.

By making these connections between personal practice and civic engagement, students develop a critical understanding of contemplative practices as more than mere methods of stress relief. They come to appreciate such practices as forms of social engagement with the potential to transform the body politic as a whole. In my experience, this process serves as an invitation for students to write their own songs of protest, so to speak, by embodying contemplative principles in both their personal and civic lives.

REFERENCES

- Attali, J. (1985). *Noise: the political economy of music*. (Brian Massumi, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Barbezat, D. & Bush, M. (2014). *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Berila, B. (2016). *Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.
- Bhattacharya, K. & Gillen, N. (2016). *Power, Race, and Higher Education: A Cross-Cultural Parallel Narrative*. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Brazier, D. (2015). It Needs Saying. *Tricycle*. Retrieved from <http://www.tricycle.com/blog/it-needs-saying>
- Clark, L. S. (2005). *From angels to aliens: Teenagers, the media, and the supernatural*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Clarkson, A. (2001). The intent of the musical moment: Cage and the transpersonal. In D. W. Bernstein & C. Hatch (Eds.), *Writings through John Cage's music, poetry, and art* (62-112). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Healey, K. (2015a). Contemplative media studies. *Religions*, 6, pp. 948-968.
- Healey, K. (2015b). Disrupting Wisdom 2.0: The Quest for "Mindfulness" in Silicon Valley and Beyond. *Journal of Religion, Media, and Digital Culture*, 4(1), pp. 67-95.
- Hoover, S. M. (2006). *Religion in the media age*. New York: Routledge.
- Hutchinson, W. (1976). *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Katz, J. (1999). John Cage's queer silence, or how to avoid making matters worse. *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, 5(2), 231- 252. Retrieved from <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzWorse.html>

- King, Jr., M. L. (1986). Love, law, and civil disobedience. In J. M. Washington (Ed.), *A testament of hope: the essential writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (43-53). San Francisco: Harper & Row. (Originally printed in 1961).
- McDonald, M. B. (1995). Training the nineties, or the present relevance of John Coltrane's music of theophany and negation. *African American Review*, 29(2), 275-282.
- Moore, R. L. (1994). *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*. Oxford University Press.
- Orr, D. (2014). A philosophical framework for contemplative education. In O. Gunnlaugson, E. Sarath, C. Scott, and H. Bai (Eds.), *Contemplative learning and inquiry across disciplines*. (31-50). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Roof, W. C. (1999). *Spiritual marketplace: baby boomers and the remaking of American religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sarath, E. (2013). *Improvisation, creativity, and consciousness: jazz as integral template for music, education, and society*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Service, T. (2010, November 5). Cage against the machine—enjoy the silence. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2010/nov/05/cage-against-machine-silence-christmas>
- Sidran, B. (1981). *Black Talk*. New York: Da Capo Press. (Originally published 1971).
- Spellman, A. B. (2004). *Four Jazz Lives*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Tam, R. (2014, August 22). Artists protest through song in the wake of Ferguson shooting. *PBS News Hour*. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/art/artists-release-new-songs-inspired-events-ferguson/>
- Tillet, S. (2015, January 20). The return of the protest song. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/01/the-return-of-the-protest-song/384631/>
- Wikimedia Commons. File:Ninedots.svg <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ANinedots.svg>
- Wilber, K. (2002). *Boomeritis: a novel that will set you free*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Wuthnow, R. (1998). *After heaven: spirituality in America since the 1950s*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zajonc, A. (2014). Contemplative pedagogy in higher education: Toward a more reflective academy. In O. Gunnlaugson, E. Sarath, C. Scott, and H. Bai (Eds.), *Contemplative learning and inquiry across disciplines*. (15-29). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.