

## Some notes on 'John 4:33'

I co-wrote this piece with Dan O'Connor and Djuna Lee backstage at a concert in 2017. I had half-seriously thought about getting a tattoo that said 'John 4:33' but hesitated (and ultimately decided against this) because I imagined that most people would read this as a straight Bible quote rather than a very silly and obtuse experimental music pun. I have jokingly referred to John Cage as 'our lord JC' both recognising his importance in my musickal journey (and that of other people I know) as well as making fun of the problematic tendency of some people to idolise him or his work. This joke owes a lot to the *Not the Nine O'Clock News* sketch 'General Synod's Life Of Python' which contains a discussion of the imagined film 'The Life of Christ' seen as "a lampoon of the comic messiah himself—our lord John Cleese—even the initials, JC are the same" (*Not The Nine O'Clock News*, 1979).

Somehow talking about 'our lord JC' morphed into the creation of this piece; in part by looking up what the verse John 4:33 said (which I had not actually done myself). The idea of performers reading silently obviously references Cage's *4'33"* although in this piece the performers do have a text score to 'perform', albeit silently, to themselves. The verse inspired the optional food offerings.

This piece obviously constitutes a joke; but the silliness of the piece feels important to me—as someone who genuinely feels moved and inspired by Discordianism as well as Cage's work, I find it important to not shy away from the silliness or humour of 'performing silently' (alongside the other important questions and experiences this piece provokes). Different meditation traditions, especially Zen have long histories of embracing humour and absurdity. Some practitioners of experimental music can get a bit serious—at the expense of other ways of experiencing the world. And, as Our Lord JC said himself, "I consider laughter preferable to tears" (Cage, 1960). I see my piece as faithful to our lord JC, but "faithful in the way that blasphemy is faithful" (Haraway, 1991, p. 149).

For an even sillier reading of the piece, we might consider the Bible verse as it pertains to our lord JC and silence. The disciplines ask the question 'did someone bring food?' because Jesus has just said he feels fully satiated to a Samaritan woman.

She had come to get water at the well and Jesus has talked (cryptically) to her saying that people who drink at this well will get thirsty again, whereas if they drink of His water they will have their thirst quenched indefinitely. He then says the same of His food and the disciples turn up and get confused wondering if someone else gave Jesus some food while they had wondered off. If we had the inclination, we could read this score as suggesting that silence provides a deeper, more ‘thirst-quenching’ sonic nourishment than the everyday satisfaction of music. Music can provide sustenance, but only temporarily, whilst silence nourishes us indefinitely (and perhaps transcendently). Or we might read the apostles confusion as analogous to the confusion of audience members (and sometimes performers) playing Cageian music. “O, has the performance started already?”

Alongside these readings, we should remember that Cage’s chance compositions technique—building up randomly generated units of silence until he had finished his score—holds the responsibility for the length of his piece and therefore which Bible verse my own piece centres around. In this sense, ‘John 4:33’ functions as a work of Dada magick as well as an ode to the goddess Apophenia—the personification of our ability to find patterns and make meaning out of randomness (Carroll, 2008).

### Bibliography

- Cage, J. (1960). 'Water Walk' performed live on 'I've Got a Secret'. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-koTMW95NZs>
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