>> Welcome to the podcast series of Raising the Bar Sydney. Raising the Bar in 2019 saw 21 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into bars across Sydney, all on one night. In this podcast, you'll hear Damien Ricketson's talk. Listen here, sound, silence and the definition of music. Enjoy the talk.

[Applause]

>> Good evening. Many thanks for coming to the [inaudible] tonight. It's – I really do genuinely appreciate you being here. Now, I am here tonight to teach you how to listen. And in giving a lecture on listening, I also have to provoke a few questions around the very definition of music, what it is exactly, and hopefully have you leaving here with an open mind, a heightened sense of your sonic surrounds, and the ability to hear more beauty in your everyday environment, and maybe even just have you treading a slightly more gentle and responsive path in this world. Now, do you know who I credit for teaching me how to listen? No, it's not my mum.

[Music]

I credit the late great composer and perhaps philosopher John cage. So, hands up who's heard of John Cage? That's a pretty good show of hands. And what is he most famous or perhaps infamous for? That's it, four minutes 33, his famous silent work, a glorious conundrum of a thing. Of course, like I should point out here that John cage has written a whole range of beautiful actually sounding music. So, please do check out, for example, the sonatas and interludes you were just hearing a little excerpt in from [inaudible]. Perhaps some of his found objects that you're hearing a lot of these progression works, for example. And I particularly like the number of pieces of his – the latter part of his period, a period of his life that have a beautiful sort of ambient beauty about them. But yeah, let's deal with four minutes 33. So, who would like to hear it? See, this is the part of the night where I freak out the people trying to make a podcast out of this. How about I just play one of the movements? So, yes, I mean, this work actually has movements, in case you're wondering. It even has a score of sheet music, and if you look at that score, it says one as in movement one tacit, two tacit, three tacit. And I'm sure there's plenty of [inaudible] in the room, who will recognise that tacit simply means stay silent or, you know, sit out this section of the music or, in this case, the whole piece. So, four minutes 33 obviously attracts a bit of scepticism, if not outright fury, but it's also opened up a lot of discussion and even, dare I say, adoration. Earlier this year, as I said, I met a guy who loved four minutes 33 so much that he had the score tattooed permanently on his body. I'm not quite that hardcore about this, but I do actually start one of my subjects at the conservatory with a performance of four minutes 33. It tends to freak the students out a little bit. You know, what on Earth is our lecturer doing? You know, I pay money for these lectures. How dare he just sit there for four and a half minutes doing nothing. And you might be wondering the same for all I know, although I don't think you paid for this from what I understand. But anyway, because we don't have that much

time, I will perform for you just the last movement, and I'll use the timings of the premiere performance, which will be one minute 40 by the pianist David Tudor. Who premiered the work on the 29th of August 1952, in Woodstock. I'll also give you a heads up that once this is over, I want you to help me recount the sonic characteristics of this particular performance. You might want to take some mental notes. You might want to pull out your phone or your device to take some notes and – or you might want to go old school and just write down what you hear on these wonderfully university, you know, burnt orange branded [inaudible]. So, let me just call up a kilter. Okay, we're ready. Here we go.

[Applause]

So, just in case you're wondering what I'm holding, this is an Aztec death whistle. It's, believe me, it's probably better that I left it silent, and in this performance it just had a, I guess, a signifying function that – a performative function that that some kind of music could be about to happen or is happening. So, hands up who thought that was complete and utter nonsense? Come on, you can be honest. We're going two and coming three. Only two? I put my own hand up as a 19 – my 19-year-old self. I thought this was complete nonsense. Okay, who, hands up, who thinks that this performance absolutely qualifies as music, no question? My current self. Well, not a lot more I have to say. So, I'm presuming that means most of the room is somewhere in the middle, in between maybe, maybe not. Is that fair? Okay, who's undecided? Okay, okay, okay. So, my job now is to try and swing most of those towards the yes category. Well, let's go down to that. Look, the first time I came across this piece, I did think it was a nonsense, you know? And over the ensuing 20 something years, I have changed my mind, and here's why, as I've already said, I credit Cage for teaching me how to listen. He taught me to just shut up for one minute and pay attention to my sonic surrounds. He taught me the art of being attuned to the possibility of beauty in unexpected places, and he taught me to be more open minded about what may or may not constitute the experience of music. And perhaps most importantly, he taught me that listening is actually a discipline. It's something that needs to be practised. Now, there's a reason I start that class at the con in silence. Silence is the inherent foundation upon which music exists. It's a blank sheet of infinite possibilities in which we can try to reimagine music afresh. But the first thing you would've noticed in my performance was that it was anything but silent. So, what were some of the sonic characteristics of that particular performance? Anyone?

>> The fridge.

>> The fridge. Is it definitely the fridge?

[Inaudible]

Anything else?

>> Breathing?

>> Breathing. I could hear my own. Were you hearing mine coming through

the mic? Yeah, okay. Cops? Coughs, coughs, yeah. The cops [inaudible] be one of those geeks, you know? Anything else? I was particularly focussed on this air conditioning unit. That was really, really getting to me. Yeah, I was glad. That was a nice kind of conclusion. That's the kind of cadence, right? Okay, so the first point to notice was, of course, that it wasn't silent at all. Four minutes 33 acts as a frame which to draw your attention to your environment and become aware of sounds you may otherwise not notice. And trust me, even in the highest quality concert hold the most well-behaved audience, and I have to say you are one of the most well-behaved audiences I've ever experienced in this, having performed this piece multiple times now. But my point is that, you know, you will be drawn to sounds that you never knew were there, unless you had paid attention. And even Cage himself famously points out that even if you go into an atomic chamber that's completely soundproof and completely acoustically deadened room, you're still likely to hear arguably two things, a high pitch sound of your own nervous system and the low pitch sound of blood flowing in your veins. So, there is no such thing as silence. Sorry, guys, you just simply cannot escape it, but we can also talk about silence somewhat more metaphorically. [Inaudible] in the late 40s, I found out by experiment, that silence is not acoustic, it is a change of mind. Now, it's this perceptual shift in the mind that I'm hoping to try and impart on you at least a little bit tonight. I think it's important to note a certain zenlike undercurrent that informs Cage's thinking. Cage had a lifelong friend in the Indian musician Gita Sarabhai, who once challenged him that the purpose of music was not to express emotions. And indeed, this idea of music as being some kind of conveyance of the composer's feelings is arguably a fairly recent and Eurocentric conception. But rather, she suggested that the function of music is one of quietening and sobering the mind to make it more susceptible to divine influences. So, one of the many wonderful cage quotes, and there are many, but one that I like is as follows, "If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight, then 16, then 32, and eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all." Now, this is risky advice to give to any composer I have to admit, but to me, it reads as almost a sort of meditative search for enlightenment, if you will. You know, that is if one is able to focus deeply and profoundly on something, you will eventually shift – experience some kind of shift in perception, perhaps a new insight, perhaps a new feeling, perhaps some new understanding of your surrounds. And this is a bit provocative when applied to listening to sound and music, because in a way, it sort of suggests that the moment that one discovers that it's not boring at all, it's not something that is engineered by the composer or the musician on stage, but perhaps something that happened just in the mind of the listener. So, even fairly liberal definitions of music, and we had one earlier this [inaudible] comes to mind with this organised sound, that even though that is – sort of liberates us from notions of fashion and taste, this – the definition is still very founded on the understanding that music is willfully constructed, you know, that it is the product of compositional intent. And yet four minutes 33 arguably even rejects this understanding and introduces the idea that art is potentially everywhere. It puts the definition of what is

music not so much at the will of the composer but subjectively in the ears of the listener. If music is not created by the composer, is it simply a construct of the listener? And I've had a little bit of talk of the natural world in the earlier presentation by Anna Reed, and I put it to you that if you listen to the natural world, I don't know, a waterfall, a thunderstorm, [inaudible] in a field I think we had, you know, if you're listening for no other reason than wonder in enjoyment in the sense of sounds, are you experiencing music? I mean, my brain or my brain processes the signal from my ears in a few ways, right? I process sounds for potential warnings or threats. You know, that is a sound that is unexpected or seemingly out of place in an otherwise familiar sonic environment might alert me to an approaching threat. I also process sounds for the acquisition of information, just as you were doing right now listening to my words and decoding the information of auditory language. And then we have this curious state of listening for seemingly no direct utilitarian reason other than pure enjoyment. Now, is this where we experience – is this where the experience music is constructed, and is the experience of sonic enjoyment that I might have listening to music in a concert hall or a bar the same as I might have listening to those [inaudible] in the field? Now, look, for my limited understanding of where the hard sciences are with this kind of question, you know, which part of my brain lights up when I'm attending to sound for no other reason than curiosity or enjoyment, I still fairly – we're still in the infancy of understanding. And certainly, there's a more philosophical debate around the definition of the experience of music is extremely varied. Cage [inaudible] is kind of on the extreme end of that debate. Now, I would say that as a composer, you know, it's not so hard to manipulate people's emotions, you know, make you cry or amp you up, you know, at least at a very superficial level. And I have to say, unfortunately, therefore, as a listener, as soon as I sense that a composer is trying to deliberately manipulate my emotions, I tend to instinctively resist or push back, you know, put up a wall. I would say that all of the really profound and the magical moments of powerful connexion that I've had with music have been quite self-reflective ones. It's more as though the composer, rather than trying to engineer a response from me, the listener at a prescribed moment in time is put into place, situation, or a sound environment, which after a period of [inaudible] listening triggers some kind of sense of reconnection or something new, some new awareness of myself in the expression of another striking moment of empathy in a situation of strangeness. But again, this is quite challenging for a composer like myself, insofar as it recognises that it's this sense of deep connectedness is so heavily dependant on the state of the listener. You know, that change of mind, that moment when one discovers that it's not boring at all. [Inaudible] Cage's works.

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>> So, let's come back a little bit to the listener rather than the creator and consider listening in terms of attending. So, you know, the French philosopher Roland Barthes, in his essay "Listening" makes a distinction between hearing and listening. He states that hearing is a physiological phenomena, and listening

is a psychological act. So, right now, you're probably hearing the room but listening to me. Does that make sense? So, but you do have the power to switch your point of attention should you choose. So, if you're finding me boring, I, you know, volume aside, you know, I'm the only guy in the room with a mic, you could probably white noise my voice and choose instead to shift your focus of attention to that fridge over there. And if you are getting bored, please, please do so. So, Cage comments that, I guess, the traditional Western view of art is that attention is focussed on one specific centre where the art is taking place, for example, an orchestra on a stage. So, Cage rejects this predetermined centring and at least tries to argue that art is everywhere, and the centre is wherever an individual decides to pay attention to. Now, as theorists such as a hidden Anahid Kassabian, in her book "Ubiquitous Listening" more broadly points out that listening, conscious or not, produces effective responses in the body that ultimately lead, in part, to what we call emotion. So, I guess, unlike Barthes, all listening, focussed or not, is recognised for its power to influence our mental being. But as with Cage that effective power isn't restricted to that which we conventionally call music. And we know this from research into well-being. You know, a child's anxiety on being in a hospital is not increased not only by the unfamiliar visual environment, but also the unfamiliar sonic environment. On a [inaudible] modes of listening argues that in our contemporary world a certain type of listening literacy is needed in order to negotiate our position within the complex layering of sounds in our everyday. So, we develop a kind of sonic information fluency, if you will, [inaudible] being able to decode these layers from the kinds of sounds of the natural worlds through to the manmade sounds of our machinery and technology through to the sort of music that's forced on us on every turn through to more obvious musical context. So, what can we make out of all of this? You know, on the one hand, we have this idea that music or at least some kind of aestheticized sonic experience can be extended or opened up beyond conventional musical instruments than the conventional sites of music making, such as concert halls, bars, or nightclubs. And yet we also seem to [inaudible] having to negotiate an ever increasingly – increasing kind of barrage of noise of information. And here's where I'm going to pull it back to the discipline of listening and this whole idea of a fluency or a literacy of listening. So, in my role at the conservatory I'm sometimes asked things like, "Can you really teach composition?" And I'll admit, you know, that there are some questions around, you know, creativity or [inaudible] this idea of originality, you know, is whether this is, you know, something innate or learnt. Of course, we can teach musical conventions, you know, the rules of Western tonal harmony and counterpoint. We can also help develop – students develop musical sort of analytical skills, you know, the ability to pull apart someone else's music to try and see how it works, and through doing so acquires some new compositional techniques in the process. And we can also, you know, get [inaudible] expose students, I guess, to a wide range of sounds and ideas. But one thing that I really try, don't always succeed, but I try to engender my students is around the skill of listening. Like, I ask first years to get into a habit of recording interesting sounds, musical or otherwise every day, as they

encounter them. So, for example, I will ask the first-year students to make sound diaries, record five seconds of sound a day and then edit them together into little sort of 35 second sort of weeklong slabs of audio. We had an earlier comment from Anna about recollection of the grasping cup. Now, I have one student, ex-student now, who's done this sound exercise now for what must be approaching a decade. He drops these sounds into an online interface, which is built, which is essentially a sound calendar, and this takes discipline to do, right? This is like a musician practising scales or something. Now interestingly, this student reports that when they listen back, all it takes is one second of audio to unlock a whole wealth of memories, not just of the object or environment that was being recorded, but of the time and place where they were that day, the sensorial memories, the smell, the humidity, and even the emotional memories of how they were feeling at the time. I'm sure there's a great research study in this project, but how many of you regularly capture audio of your everyday environment? I'm sure you capture images of your environment. If you come across a beautiful vista, I'm sure you'll reach instinctively for your phone and take a photo. But how many of you will click the sort of, you know, the voice memo function or whatever it is on your phone? So, I put it to you, next time you are feeling in or at one in your environment, why not capture the sound, because the sound is having an effective impact on you, on your mind and body. And it's probably why you reach for your phone to capture it visually in the first place or the next time perhaps you listen in wonder to a thunderstorm, capture it. Yeah, sure, it's not going to be anything like the immersive physicality of experiencing that for real, but nor was that photo. So, I guess, as with the students secondary, what we're talking about here is a trigger or an icon or, you know, a shortcut to the recollection of a more embodied experience. So, likewise, if you – if someone you love has a special occasion [inaudible] achieving [inaudible], again, I'm sure you'll instinctively reach for your phone to capture it visually. You may have thousands of photos of those who are close to you, but how many of you have audio recordings of your loved ones that truly capture the full expressive range of their voice? If you were to lose them tomorrow, are you confident that you would be able to recall the nuanced [inaudible] inflexions of their voice? So, let's come back to Cage's four minutes 33 for a minute and see how this plays into this, at least from my perspective. Look, when I perform this to a cohort of first-year students at the beginning of a lecture series, what starts is a little bit of bewilderment amongst the students, invariably turns into a heated discussion around what constitutes the definition of music or at least its experience. And while we seldom reach a consensus on this question that I asked, is four minutes 33 – does it actually qualify as a musical experience, we do usually come to some kind of agreement that the work represents some form of conceptual art, if for no other reason than provoking the heated discussion in the first place. All right, the musician, writer, and artist, Kim-Cohen has a wonderful term, kind of borrowed term called non-cochlear sound art to describe music that is not wholly addressed to the ear. Check out his book "In the Blink of an Ear". By non-cochlear he's referring to works that evoke or engage with the idea of music, not just the sonic experience, that is works that can be seen

as somehow critiquing the musical, social, or political context in which musical works are made or viewed. And this is certainly a sort of conceptual frame of understanding into which works like Cage's four minutes 33 are usually placed. But for me, I have to say, the experience of four minutes 33 is in itself a form of creative practice. If I can have the discipline to be quiet for at least four and a half minutes a day, can I make my mind more susceptible to divine influences, to use Sarabhai's words. Of course, I don't literally need to be performing or listening to infinite versions of this work construct that is four minutes 33. And I think it is interesting to note how Cagean aesthetics start to intersect with, you know, meditation, mindfulness, zen Buddhism, and other various kinds of practices that may also seek some sense of heightened awareness in achievement to our immediate state of being in relationship to our environment. So, when I heard the performance of four minutes 33 tonight, I didn't say much here about it. I didn't hear Cage per se, but I didn't even hear music to be honest, but I did hear potential for music. To be honest, I thought I would hear a little bit more. You're too well-behaved. I was going to say I would expect in the [inaudible] environment to perhaps hear a little more people glass. So, I was hoping that I might be able to mention the percussion piece in coming, but I might have to refer to Anna' talk for that percussion moment in this space. But I could hear also a potential ambient spatial work matter of law, noisy pitch tones, because there's various kinds of – I'm surprised that I was hearing more sustained tones in this space. From the centre, I've got a good, perfect pitch, because there's a pitch to this this air conditioner as there is to the – this – the fridge and the [inaudible], so I couldn't hear a piece of music being made out of long sustained texted turns. I also noted out, by the way, that if I ever had a film gig where I needed a slightly barish ambience sound design without too much speaking, you know, that might get away in the main dialogue. You know, I know that there's now a [inaudible] podcast that has exactly one and a half minutes of this stuff. But when I talk about capturing the rumble of a thunderstorm, I'm not just talking about memory recollection. You know, for me, I'm thinking creatively, how can I score or orchestrate a similar kind of visceral sensation or some kind of [inaudible] full body concussion? And when I speak of recording the voice of your loved ones, likewise, I'm not necessarily thinking of capturing their words, as valuable and beautiful as that might be, what I'm wondering in my mind is what is that powerful, expressive essence in the distilled identity of that voice that is embedded into micro contours that could become some kind of beautiful melody? That is this generative power of listening as a pathway to creative action that is, of course, valuable certainly to me, as a composer. So, Cage had a code of conduct with his students. We go through it in one of my classes, and we adopt some and ignore others, but one of the rules is to break the rules, and the way to break the rules is not a deliberate destructive act, but the act of quote "Leaving plenty of room for X qualities." By X qualities, he's talking about chance, okay? And how many of the world's great scientific or artistic insights and achievements have happened by accident? So, when you're too focussed on a predetermined goal, then you're too tied up in the [inaudible] of the urgency of the every day. Your focus is in the wrong spot. You're attending

to the wrong spot, and you'll miss the beauty [inaudible], and here's where we have this paradox of discipline. So, I'm going to argue that it actually takes discipline to generate space for nothing to happen, to allow your mind to wander, to deliberately take that detour away from where you think you should be headed and put yourself even in a position where you can have a happy accident. So, for me, four minutes 33 is simply an impetus, a metaphor for momentarily dropping habits, dropping conventions and expectations, and allowing some space for X qualities to happen, a moment to notice the world around me, a world that, if only I take time to look, is invariably rich, and right for discovery in action. So, while this discipline of listening obviously has potential creative function for me personally, as a composer, and why I try to instil it in some of my students, I'm also talking about listening more broadly as a metaphor in terms of attentiveness and understanding of ourselves in our world around us. We live in a world of manmade noise, and I do manmade, the ever-growing din of our kind of mechanical subjugation of the natural world, the bleeding utterances of narcissistic social media, bellicose soundbites of our politicians, you know, we seem to be engaged collectively, in a lot more noisemaking than noise listening. So, I could've come to the substance of silence and the value of listening via many artists or philosophers or even spiritual figures. But for me, it's been the gentle radicalism of Cage with this powerful piece of nothing that has helped me, not only in the personal pleasure of trying to continuously hear the world fresh, but also as a guiding metaphor in this perennial question, which I think we all face in how we can collectively walk this fragile world of ours in a more ethical and empathic kind of way. [Inaudible] time. A couple of days ago, I heard a fascinating talk by Jennifer Campbell, you know, what happens when the land doesn't sing anymore. And this was in reference to indigenous music of the Tiwi people in the islands north of Darwin. Now, it's a talk part – in part about loss of cultural knowledge both through geographic and temporal dislocation, but it was also about climate change and its impact on the eco acoustics of country, like how our sound world, our natural sound world of the environment is changing as creatures become fewer or even extinct and in this case, particularly to that region. Now, Jennifer [inaudible] describes the singing tradition there as very much being in dialogue or in duet with the natural world and raises a question around how does one's music survive, if this other voice in which you're supposed to be in dialogue with is an integral aspect of the fabric of that musical conception, and what happens if it's no longer there? So, I guess, this concept of music emerging out of the sounds of the natural world is, of course, has, of course, a long historical precedent and is particularly strong in many indigenous musical forms. I mean, like the anecdote of the song man who listens for days on ends to a roaring waterfall, waiting for the melody within that white noise to reveal itself. And this is where it's going to kind of pivot to an outro track by ending on Pauline Oliveros, some of you might know. Pauline Oliveros has developed an entire artistic practice around the concept of deep listening. Her music very much emerges from the environment in which it's played, and as with jazz or any other improvisatory tradition, it is a learnt practice aestheticized artistic practice. And you can even go and study at the deep learning Deep

Learning Institute. So, but one of my takes on Oliveros' works is that she follows these stratas of sound world – strata of sound world, you know, from your environmental sound right through to more musical – conventional musical sound into this sort of singular materiality of sound into which, after listening and contemplation, you may have permission to contribute. You know, so she arrives at a very ephemeral music practice that is very much grounded in the moment, a very specific [inaudible]. So, when we finish our Q&A and segue into drinks, I thought we might be able to listen a little to sounds born of listening, some of the music from her deep listening band's original recording, made by Pauline Oliveros [inaudible] impending artists in 1988, in a giant system of a truly epic reverb. But I wanted to end with Oliveros' [inaudible] little quote as well, which I think relates to some of these bigger questions about how we can walk – how we can tread lighter on this Earth in a more empathic relationship. And that's just simple, a little sentence from her, which I think is quite poignant, encouraging us to basically walk so silently that the bottom of your feet become ears. Thank you for listening.

[Applause]

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