

Listening in the Margins

Ava Liversidge, Class of 2026

This summer, I conducted research at the crossroads of philosophy and sound studies with special attention to theories of silence's role in the post-industrial soundscape. My exploration of silence and environment bolstered my course of studies in both philosophy and music. The project consisted of two main phases: (1) Research into philosophical discussions on the origins of nothingness (specifically, silence) and how these theories have manifested in the contemporary intellectual landscape and (2) an analysis of both how the practice of listening has deteriorated amidst new media forms and a mounting attention crisis and silence's role in aesthetics. Ultimately, I analyzed the relationship between the philosophical origins of nothingness and the salvation silence might offer to a world that so critically lacks it.

My approach went as follows: (1) Establish philosophical foundations with special attention to Heidegger's selected works in metaphysics and ontology, (2) Analyze Cage's theoretical conception of silence in relation to ontology, (3) Examine selected works of contemporary sound studies and cultural criticism scholarship, (4) Synthesize these perspectives and supplement my survey of the texts with a unique argument about silence's role as a modern ideal. Interrogating the current state of silence in popular consciousness offers a pertinent contribution to sound studies scholarship dedicated to the imbrication of sound, environment, and experience. Furthermore, this work begins to answer the urgent question of how to go about healing a gravely oversaturated and overstimulated world.

My research culminated in three main components: (1) a paper examining how Heidegger's ontological work has contoured our dominating conceptions of both nothingness and silence, (2) a paper analyzing how our listening practices have deteriorated amidst the mounting attention crisis, silence's potential to be used both as a tool for healing and domination, and the aesthetics of silence in the works of experimental composers like John Cage, Yoko Ono, and Pauline Oliveros, and (3) a field guide to silence which taxonomizes seven key experiences or types of silence. Throughout this research and writing process, I was able to evaluate silence's key role in a variety of intellectual arenas: silence informs how we sensorially make understandable our metaphysical position, how we articulate moods of uncanniness and anxiety, and how we define art's usefulness and ultimate goal. Most importantly, through taxonomizing the diverse kinds of silence we encounter in daily life, I found just how pervasive this acoustic concept is in the construction of not just modern life, but human life.

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Frank Mauceri

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