

Performing *A Dip in the Lake* By Lauren Watkins, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

The scores that John Cage composed did not always look or sound like what you might expect an orchestra to play. When Cage died in 1992 at the age of 79, the *New York Times* said:

“He composed for every imaginable kind of instrument, from standard orchestral strings to "prepared" pianos, altered by putting nails, paper, wood, rubber bands or other objects between their strings to make them sound percussive and otherworldly. He wrote electronic and tape works, and works that involved only spoken texts. His often impish scoring, in fact, might include radios, toys, the sounds of water being sipped or vegetables being chopped.”

Source: Allan Kozinn, “John Cage, 79, a Minimalist Enchanted with Sound, Dies,” *The New York Times*, August 13, 1992,
<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0905.html>

Cage was interested in sounds of all kinds—even silence. One of his most famous scores, titled *4'33*, is exactly 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence. When the piece is performed, one or more musicians take the stage, but they don't play a single note. What's left are the sounds in the auditorium as people shift in their seats, sneeze, or murmur something to their neighbor. These noises, and the silence between, become the performance.

In early 2000, two decades after Cage first created *A Dip in the Lake*, musician Robert Pleshar came across a copy of the list of locations in the score. He was intrigued and invited a friend to help him perform the piece. Since Cage did not leave specific instructions, Pleshar and his friend were left to interpret how they could play the score. They decided they would travel to each location in *A Dip in the Lake* and audio-record the sounds they found there. Over nearly two years they took photographs at each location, documenting the experience visually. After they had compiled all of the recordings and images, Pleshar wrote about the experience and what he discovered:

Many different things can be heard on these recordings: birds, insects, conversations, songs playing from car radios, car alarms, horns, lots of traffic sounds, machinery, water, trains, wind leaves, rain, snow, walking, etc. Doing all of the recordings for this project really opened up my ears and eyes to a great amount of sounds and sights. The subtle differences between cars on wet and dry pavement, cicadas crescendo-ing and decrescendo-ing, the eerie and beautiful high-pitched wheeze of slow-moving trains in a railroad yard, a sole leaf skittering across the ground, and water flowing through cracks were examples of sounds that I had heard my entire life, but never really listened to until now.

Source: “John Cage, *A Dip in the Lake*,” Ubuweb: Sound,
http://www.ubu.com/sound/cage_dip.html

Study Questions

What was unusual about the instruments that John Cage used in his compositions?

Imagine that you are attending a performance of *4'33*. What would your reaction be? Why?

How did Robert Pleshar “perform” *A Dip in the Lake*? What did he learn from the experience?

Pleshar had set out on a specific mission: to visit every location on *A Dip in the Lake*. But what he writes here makes it seem that the project became less about checking every address off of the list. Instead, Cage took him on a journey that surprised him. The score gave him a reason to explore the city and notice things all along the way.

Pleshar was not the only one to be inspired by *A Dip in the Lake* in this way. A 1982 article about John Cage in *Chicago Magazine* included suggestions from artists about how they might perform the piece, taking their own journeys into Cage's work and the creative process.

One choreographer imagined a performance with hundreds of dancers taking to the streets of Chicago to dance swim-like movements to music playing through headphones.

Yet another composer suggested something similar to Pleshar's project of collecting sounds at different locations on the score, with one twist: at any time the person involved in the piece would find themselves at the lakefront (which happens a number of times; take a look at the map to see how many lines end up there), they would be instructed to throw the tape recording into the lake.

This, the composer said, would be a gesture "symbolizing art as process, not product"—a thought that is similar to Pleshar's reaction to his own project. In these performances, *A Dip in the Lake* was about the journey, not the destinations.

How did other artists imagine that they would perform *A Dip in the Lake*?

Reread the last sentence of the article. What do you think the writer is saying? What evidence in the text supports your ideas?