

composure. At one time stillness was a precious article in an unwritten code of human rights. Man held reservoirs of stillness in his life to restore the spiritual metabolism. Even in the hearts of cities there were the dark, still vaults of churches and libraries, or the privacy of drawing room and bedroom. Outside the throb of cities, the countryside was accessible with its lulling whirr of natural sounds. There were still times too. The holy days were quieter before they became holidays. In North America, Sunday was the quietest day before it became Fun-day. The importance of these quiet groves and times far transcended the particular purposes to which they were put. We can comprehend this clearly only now that we have lost them.

Ceremonies of Silence In the park near the Botanic Gardens in Melbourne there is a sign:

IN MEMORY OF
EDWARD GEORGE HONEY

1855-1922

A Melbourne journalist, who,
while
living in London, first suggested
the solemn ceremony of

SILENCE

now observed in all British countries
in remembrance of those who died
in the War.

The fact is that as the memory of the world wars has receded, the observance of silence at 11 a.m. on November 11 has each year become more straggled. It will be the responsibility of the acoustic designers to work not only for the repatriation of quiet groves, but also to lobby for the reintroduction of quiet times. As a matter of fact, Yehudi Menuhin, President of the International Music Council of UNESCO, proposed at the 1975 congress that World Music Day should in the future be celebrated by a minute of silence. We are discussing here something much more important than setting time limits on noisy sounds; we are discussing the deliberate celebration of stillness, which, when observed by an entire society together, is breathtakingly magnificent. Here is an example: the program of the War Remembrance as commemorated each May 4 in Utrecht, Netherlands.

6:00 p.m. Lowering of flags to half mast in the entire city, until darkness falls. Closing of public amusements. No advertising or store-window lighting.

- 7:15 p.m. Participants in the *Silent Procession* will form in threes in St. Peter's churchyard. The places for relatives of the deceased, and other participants will be indicated on signs. People are asked not to carry ensigns, flags or wreaths with them.
- 7:30-8:00 p.m. The procession will slowly make its way beneath the sound of all church bells. During the procession, people are requested *to be still* (literally, to pay attention to being silent). The route: St. Peter's churchyard to the Cathedral Square via Voetius Street, Cathedral Street, the Old Church Square, Choir Street, Servet Street and under the Cathedral Tower.
- 8:00 p.m. *The bells end and two minutes of total silence begin.* This is indicated by the first of eight chimes of the Cathedral Clock and the lighting of the Cathedral Square.
- 8:02 p.m. End of two minutes' silence. The Royal Utrecht PTT Brass Band will play two couplets from the *Wilhelmus*, sung by those present. During this a wreath will be placed at the foot of the Memorial to the Fallen on behalf of the entire citizenry of Utrecht. All participants in the procession will file past the Memorial and will have the opportunity of laying the flowers brought with them. Everyone is urged to co-operate so that this may be carried out with as much stillness as possible.
- 8:15-8:45 p.m. An organ recital in the church by Stoffel van Viegen, closed by the singing of two couplets from the *Wilhelmus*.
Participation is open to everyone.

Attending this ceremony Barry Truax recalled:

It is a unique acoustic ritual in the community. Nothing in the experience of a North American can match it for depth of emotion. As you approach the square, the thundering mass of the largest Cathedral bells rolls over you, enforcing a hypnotic and fearful silence on everyone gathering. The entire weight of the tragedy of the War seems expressed in the heavy low-pitched mass of sound emanating from the high tower.

Slowly, one by one, the bells end and the texture thins as the procession emerges from the passageway under the Tower and slowly divides into rows in front of the Memorial.

The noisy city has become deathly quiet. Now the silence seems as oppressive as the bells did a few moments before. That heavy bombardment seems to have cleansed the air of the city's usual profanity, leaving a strange and nervous calm.

Very quietly a handful of musicians sound the opening chords of the National Anthem in muted low registers. There is an electric moment as a slow unison vibration is born in the throats of all present. The ground itself seems to rise to emit a resonating cry, slowly rising and turning around you in every direction. For a moment the unity these gentle and defiant people felt in the face of the Occupation seems rekindled.

Yet the military is absent. Slowly the individual mourners file past the Memorial to lay their own flowers after the young lad and girl have lifted the city's wreath into place. The number of mourners has fallen off in recent years, but for these few, the experience is relived in a profound and beautiful ceremony, which ends as we enter the Cathedral to the reverberant tones of the organ.

Western Man and Negative Silence Man likes to make sounds to remind himself that he is not alone. From this point of view total silence is the rejection of the human personality. Man fears the absence of sound as he fears the absence of life. As the ultimate silence is death, it achieves its highest dignity in the memorial service.

Since modern man fears death as none before him, he avoids silence to nourish his fantasy of perpetual life. In Western society, silence is a negative, a vacuum. Silence for Western Man equals communication hang-up. If one has nothing to say, the other will speak; hence the garrulosity of modern life which is extended by all kinds of sonic jabberware.

The contemplation of absolute silence has become negative and terrifying for Western Man. Thus when the infinity of space was first suggested by Galileo's telescope, the philosopher Pascal was deeply afraid of the prospect of eternal silence. "Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie."

When one stays for a while in an anechoic chamber—that is, a completely soundproof room—one feels a little of the same terror. One speaks and the sound seems to drop from one's lips to the floor. The ears strain to pick up evidence that there is still life in the world. When John Cage went into such a room, however, he heard two sounds, one high and one low. "When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation." Cage's conclusion: "There is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound."

When man regards himself as central in the universe, silence can only be considered as approximate, never absolute. Cage detected this relativity and in choosing *Silence* as the title for his book, he emphasized that for modern man any use of this term must be qualified or assumed to be ironical. Edgar Allan Poe touched on the same thing when in "Al Aaraaf" he wrote: "Quiet we call 'Silence'—which is the merest word of all."

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