

John Cage's Secret

by Laura Paolini

The show *I've Got A Secret*, produced by CBS, ran in syndication from 1952 to 1967. Its host, Gary Moore, moderated the show, while a panel of celebrity judges guessed at a mystery guest's secret. A possible forerunner for the vocabulary of the panel-based and reality-television shows to come, the show had a striking degree of reflexivity unexpected in an emerging medium.

In 1957 one mystery guest was Philo T. Farnsworth, who fielded questions from the celebrity panelists as they tried unsuccessfully to guess his secret ("I invented electronic television"). For stumping the panel, he received eighty dollars and a carton of Winston cigarettes. The man that invented television only appeared within his own device on this single occasion, so it's hardly a surprise that no one would recognize him on the screen he conceived.

The premise of the show was entertainment — it was a game show, after all. The audience was in on the secret. Arguably, the audience was let in on a joke; watching the panelists ask the mystery guest questions, and the guest's coy "yes" or "no" replies, naturally incited laughter. This became a fairly standard routine for *I've Got A Secret* — until on one episode a strange thing happened, and it became unclear whom the joke was on.

This particular episode aired in January, 1960, and featured a special contestant from Stony Point, New York. John Cage walked onto the stage, introduced himself and whispered his secret to the host. The caption read: "I'm going to perform one of my musical compositions." The audience clapped politely. But Cage had still more to whisper to Gary Moore: "The instruments I will use are: a Water Pitcher, an Iron Pipe, a Goose Call, a Bottle of Wine, an Electric Mixer, a Whistle, a Sprinkling Can, ice cubes, 2 Cymbals, a Mechanical Fish, a Quail Call, a Rubber Duck, a Tape Recorder, a Vase of Roses, a Seltzer Siphon, 5 Radios, a Bathtub and a GRAND PIANO." As the list scrolls by, the audience laughs louder and louder in disbelief. This was *some* secret. In fact, the secret was too good to be true! Could it possibly be a joke, like so much art before it?

The host does his best to assure the audience that this isn't a joke at all. With all seriousness, Moore skipped the show's actual game component, and introduced the sonic spectacle. Cage reminds Moore that he teaches "experimental music," not "experimental sound," and further defends his practice by saying: "Perfectly seriously, I consider music the production of sound. And since in the piece which you will hear I produce sound, I would call it music." Is it just that simple? To establish Cage's credentials as a serious musician, Moore reads a "not so favourable" review from the *New York Herald Tribune*.

Moore took this article from an older medium threatened by the new medium of television, yet one which is afforded the relative privilege of permanence. The performance itself took place in a medium that was developing a pedagogical presence; the event was structured to unleash the *avant-garde* upon the American public. The host warns Cage, "Some of them are going to laugh." Cage responds: "I consider laughter better than tears."

The instruments themselves provoked applause; the set-up was as dynamic as the performance itself. A mirror was placed above the piano to allow viewers to see Cage place a mechanical fish on the piano strings, creating effects and reverberations. The piece was originally written to incorporate five radios (they could not be plugged in during the broadcast because of a union dispute). The stopwatch must be noted, because its sounds, says Moore, "are by no means accidental in their sequence. They each must fall mathematically at a precise point. He takes it seriously, I find it interesting." And an amazing product placement: "If you are amused, you may laugh. If you like it, you may buy the recording." The artwork begins.

Cage's piece was titled *Water Walk* (1959). Specifically composed for a performer (not necessarily a musician) on a T.V. show, it is a four-part composition featuring three pages of timed events, and a floor plan for the composition's on-stage set-up. Each instrument has an arm's-length relationship to water: the bathtub, the pitcher, the ice cubes being diced in the electric mixer. Water exists in the composition in various states: solid, liquid, gas — and it's either being extruded or consumed. A wine bottle marks a perhaps metaphorical and miraculous transformation. Ultimately it's a rather involved process for making a drink (to be sipped at 2:40 in the composition). The performance element in this broadcast is important because the audience appreciates the piece more for its performative impact than for the sounds it produces. Still, after hours of rehearsal and scrutiny, the piece must necessarily accommodate the potential for laughter or tears from audiences — live or over the airwaves.

Over decades, the game-show phenomenon has morphed from radio broadcasts to "reality television." Notably, in the days of *I've Got A Secret*, many networks once known for radio were putting their acts on screen. A few decades earlier, Orson Welles' CBS radio-broadcast retelling of H.G. Wells' story, *The War of the Worlds*, scared a great number of people into thinking aliens had landed. When public outcry ensued, CBS reminded its listeners that they had been frequently told throughout the broadcast that it was a dramatic work.

Perhaps still shaken by the non-existent alien invasion, however, it seems logical that people may have been a little wary about trusting CBS — or their own ears. But could even your eyes deceive you? With *I've Got A Secret*, CBS was now broadcasting another form of culture, and the host was making sure you appreciated it as legitimate art.

“Much of what we call Sound Art has not much to do with either Sound or Art.”¹ There’s a difficulty in creating dialogue in art and not catering to a niche market, but efforts like *Water Walk* attempt to reveal art as something that’s not a secret — and not a joke — at all. This particular work’s precarious relationships to music and entertainment are potentially worrisome. The same way that performance art has its limits in time and space (which Cage also straddles), sound art is more firmly established, though perhaps not as far developed. But this discussion isn’t ultimately preoccupied with the thespian concerns of whether this is, in fact, art. The remarkable thing is it was aired on prime time, and laughed at.

At that moment in 1960, a rupture was being deepened. High art and low were becoming more and more comfortable with one another over the airwaves. At this moment, as the screens glow their blue auras into the homes of North America, everyone sees something they haven’t seen before. And everyone has an opinion about it. This is now about how audiences are constructed. The audience/perpetual adversary of modern art is the bourgeoisie — and while they may have been taken aback by this gesture and obscene noise, perhaps they were further offended by this art coming into their homes. That they were watching Cage may be presupposed by their owning T.V. sets — unlike the thirteen per cent of Americans who did not (by the end of the 1960s, 95 per cent of Americans own T.V. sets²). Television’s political impact is undeniable in retrospect. Watching Cage in 1960 was potentially a more egalitarian experience than visiting an art museum.

While some might argue that it’s one of the most overrated pieces of postmodern art, John Cage’s *4’33”* (1952) follows a similar trajectory, and it is almost prophetic. The four-minute-and-33-second composition debates the existence of silence, and how we understand cultural objects: How is the piano that is never played different from a coffee table? The question of endurance emerges, and not only for the performer: Would you rather sit through John Cage’s *4’33”* in its entirety, or Erik Satie’s *Vexations*? Is four minutes of silence worse than the same song 840 times? The Parisian *avant-garde* composer produced the work as a challenge to loathed Wagnerian musical trends.

His challenge was met. The work was first performed on September 9, 1963, from 6:00 p.m. until 12:40 p.m. the following day. The event, which involved eleven performers, was organized by Cage — and, by an interesting coincidence, two of the participants later appeared on *I’ve Got A Secret!* Welsh composer John Cale’s secret was: “I performed in a concert that was 18 HOURS.” And only Karl Schenzer (an off-Broadway actor of the day) sat in New York’s Pocket Theatre for the entire duration, because “I feel it was an

¹ Daniela Cascella. “Watch this sound.” Contemporary Magazine. Digital Art Special. Issue 91. 2007. page 16

² Gallagher, Mona. “The history and evolution of television: the 1960s and 1970s.” <http://www.helium.com/items/569934-television-1960s-dramatic-changes>

extremely important concert, because this concert was sponsored by the work of several artists, painters and sculptors who feel that the contemporary performing artist is not receiving a share in American culture today." Upon playing a section of *Vexations* on air, Cale evoked nervous laughter.

Having seen 4'33" a few times, mediated through a television, I recall the following captions from one particular broadcast: "You are invited to turn down the volume of your television sets and listen to the ambient sounds wherever this program is performed." The ambience is one phenomenon, the audience another. If the piece relies on ambience and audience reception, it almost begs the question: Do you really have to be there?

Watching it on my laptop on YouTube, I hear the video noise and notice how my own machine buzzes, as it processes the information, and how warm it feels. The ultimate question from this discussion is whether Cage's secret really taught us anything.

Through moments like these, artist and public have at times been able to observe one another. Contemplating what if anything was learned, either by Cage or by the audience, may perplex us today. But what resonates from this perplexity may allow our understanding of art and communication to continue to evolve.

The episodes of *I've Got A Secret* mentioned in this article can be viewed on YouTube:

With John Cage: [youtube.com/watch?v=IdtPFncgbHo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdtPFncgbHo)

With John Cale and Karl Schenzer: [youtube.com/watch?v=TYHIqMmtS-0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYHIqMmtS-0)