Choosing silence

Protest and performativity

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Some musicians choose not to perform in support of others. Others do so to highlight their own plight. But their silence needs an audience: ‘For disruption to work, there must be witnesses with thwarted expectations.’

The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable.
Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition [1]

During a choir rehearsal, our conductor revealed a secret. We singers were unfocused, energy was low and mistakes were being made left, right and centre. The most egregious error was our inability to agree on the downbeat. Practising this entrance again and again was tiring and frustrating; individuals and then entire parts began dropping out and not singing. In an attempt to make peace after harshly scolding sections for not entering, the conductor admitted, ‘It is my greatest fear that I will give a downbeat in the concert … and nothing will happen. You won’t sing and I will just be some idiot waving my arms on stage.’ Everyone laughed at this ridiculous image and the rehearsal continued smoothly.

This concern – one that she believed we should share and, through rehearsing, we tacitly agreed with – stemmed from the potential violation of several contracts. In a concert, the assembly of two groups of bodies – performers and audience – is beholden to the idea of a performance situation. Each group simultaneously empowers and holds power over the other, and both power the primary objective of the assembly, which is more powerful than each group individually – the performance itself. Simple contracts – performers promising to perform, the audience promising to witness – create relationships that are upheld by the production of sound and music happens.

The conductor’s fear was not that we would perform badly or that the audience would leave or boo but rather a more fundamental disturbance - our choice not to sing. If power dynamics are directly related to sound production, then performing silence, a language of denial, throws us into the realm of the political. The question immediately arises: Why are they choosing to not sing? In this hypothetical concert, the power scales tip towards the choir through an act of Schweigen.
As a native English speaker, this German word fascinates me because it has no direct equivalent. A translation of schweigen would require at least two elements - ‘remain silent’ and ‘keep quiet’ - revoking its singular action. Both phrases suggest a continuation of silence; the activity is passive because it simply prolongs what was already in place.

‘Tacit’ could approximate schweigen but, as an adjective, requires a noun to be activated. When modifying ‘silence’, tacit conveys an understanding of its meaning; it is not focused on the action of the silence. Schweigen does not necessarily promote understanding; it can also be used to obscure if someone refuses to answer a question, for example. Classical musicians are familiar with tacet, an instruction that tells the player to remain silent for long musical rests.

In comparing schweigen and tacet, a distinction arises: choice versus command. Schweigen can disturb listener expectations. The conductor feared the choir being silent rather than performing badly, because even a bad performance satisfies an anticipation of sound. Unexpected agency is exercised when someone could or should respond but does not.

Although the choir was not making a political statement, I will use its hypothetical and, therefore, potential threat of silence to examine schweigen in relation to the world of political protest. Brandon LaBelle has described silence within a legal context as a ‘vital and complicated medium’ [2] and I propose schweigen as one aspect that relates to performativity. The performative nature of schweigen as protest makes the act inseparable from the performer’s body. Indeed, the physical presence of a body exercising its own agency is part of what makes this form of silence speak so loudly. How can schweigen used by musicians on stage reveal similar power dynamics and performativity on protest platforms?

Production, disruption and choice

The potential of sound production has to be valued for schweigen to be effective as disruption. As Hannah Arendt clarifies in The Human Condition, ‘Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words’. [3] The potential to make sound and then choosing when to use that potential is what makes the action meaningful.

Tacet and schweigen can be understood as opposite ends of the ‘remaining silent’ spectrum. Holding the rest during tacet affirms and validates the musical performance. In On Revolution, Arendt describes a transcendent law ‘to which men owe obedience regardless of their consent and mutual agreements’, and tacet has a similar ‘transcendent source of authority’ – the music is simultaneously ‘beyond human power’ and created by it. [4] The musician stays quiet in the correct place and upholds the laws of the musical land; the music’s needs and listeners’ expectations are satisfied. By contrast, schweigen is actively choosing not to make sound in the ‘wrong’ place.

For disruption to work, there must be witnesses with thwarted expectations. The choir’s silence in rehearsal could have been a powerful use of schweigen if we were protesting
the conductor (or, more realistically, morning rehearsals and no coffee). In a concert, the choir’s silence is heard by the audience. As defined in Arendt’s *On Violence*, ‘Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together’. [5]

Can power come from acting in concert ‘in concerts’? In refusing the audience’s and conductor’s most basic expectations, the choir holds the highest position of power. However, as schweigen is an act of sonic denial, the choir’s power also relies on the group that is denied the performance.

**The performing body and precarity**

Once the audience questions why the choir is intentionally not singing, the choir changes from being a shapeless background effortlessly producing music to a group of people with agency. In violating the performer’s primary contract, the choir collectively changes its function from musical performance to political performativity. As Judith Butler states, ‘Performativity names that unauthorized exercise of a right to existence that propels the precarious into political life’. [6] The relationship between Butler’s theories and performance practice has been widely discussed by Erika Fischer-Lichte, particularly in the context of experimental theatre. For further journeys into the theoretical realm of performativity, explore her body of work.

When a musician chooses to remain silent, their choice is ‘unauthorized’ by the nature of the role the audience assumes them to have. However, in performing agency over sound production, the musician ‘exercises … a right to existence’. Schweigen introduces a type of corporeal autonomy that can empower through integrity of choice.

In her essay *The Aesthetics of Silence*, Susan Sontag writes, ‘Silence is the artist’s ultimate other-worldly gesture; by silence, he frees himself from servile bondage to the world, which appears as patron, client, audience, antagonist, arbiter, and distorer of his work.’ [7] Silence becomes the ultimate freedom when artistic expression turns into a commodity. In refusing the paycheck, a musician uses their precarity to express and amplify their values.

Since the site of production for live performance is the performer’s body, the physical act of performing is ‘servile bondage to the world’. By referring to music as a sound object outside of or apart from the bodies that make it, we acknowledge the ‘doer of [musical] deeds’ but not necessarily the ‘speaker of words’, the actor.

Within this context, schweigen becomes a demand on the audience to view the body as present and valid by addressing its own economic precarity and agency. As Butler states, ‘We might say: the performative emerges precisely as the specific power of the precarious – unauthorized by existing legal regimes, abandoned by the law itself – to demand the end to their precarity’. [8] Again, ‘the law’ can be compared to the looming governance of ‘the music’ and expectancy of sound. As a form of protest and inherently unauthorized act in concert, schweigen is a mode of the political.
The empty downbeat: When musicians protest

A musical boycott is an act of schweigen: by choosing not to play, musicians remain silent as a form of protest. Today’s cultural boycotts derive historical precedence from the high-profile 1980s boycott of South Africa, wherein international artists refused to perform in protest of Apartheid. Exerting agency over the means of production (the performing musicians’ own bodies) and denying the product (a live concert) operate as protest forms framed within a language of negativity. Although many factors contributed to Apartheid’s end, the boycott heightened international awareness and increased pressure on South Africa to end its practices. Despite their global dispersal, the singular group of participating artists had power through its performance of schweigen.

Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) puts the economic sacrifice of participating musicians at the forefront of its ongoing protest against Israel’s treatment of Palestinians. According to the BDS website, Israeli promoters now struggle to book the artists they want ‘despite offering large sums of money to [them] to defy the cultural boycott’. Political theorist Eyal Weizman suggests, ‘It has become popular in part because, at its most basic level, it turns non-action into a form of activism’. [9] The power of group silence is greater than that of the security afforded by money.

Simply ‘not playing’ is not enough; a musical boycott’s schweigen requires a performance of the choice. In 2015 alternative rock band Wilco announced a show cancellation on Facebook in protest of the Indiana Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Like the South Africa boycott, this musical denial heightened awareness of an issue the band is critical of. And, since Facebook was the performance platform, the audience comprised more than Wilco fans. A scan of the 6,170 comments on the band’s post suggests a range of reactions, including support (‘Thank you for taking a stand. And I am a Hoosier’), outrage (‘This band should be sued for refusing to provide service they contracted to do and not be able to cancel because of their bias and discrimination! Who cares if they disagree with other peoples feelings! [sic]’) and dismissal (‘STILL never heard of WILCO, but whoever they are, they seem to have no knowledge of the law, or decency, or history, and no desire to let people enjoy freedom.’). All this because the band refused to play!

Whether or not the performing body is viewed as an individual affects schweigen as a protest act. Bands and solo artists are more mobile in exercising their agency compared with larger, institutional music organizations, as, generally speaking, they have fewer members (e.g., five in a band compared with seventy in an orchestra) and can quickly/easily reach a consensus about action. For musicians who are not soloists, their decision to protest is complicated by their role changing from representing the group’s beliefs to their own.

In 2011 the London Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO) suspended four of its members after they signed a public letter denouncing the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. The suspension restricted the musicians from playing – silence as punishment rather than schweigen. What if the musicians had tried schweigen in a concert to express their beliefs? If the protesting orchestra members had simply walked out, it may not have been clear why or looked like a strange tacet. The umbrella of ‘the orchestra’ as a singular organization of political neutrality obscures its individual members’ agency. Power resides with the group and the group is partially formed by its reception.
If an orchestra does decide to schweigen, the protest is unmistakable. At a 2011 concert, Robert Minczuk, the then artistic director of Orquestra Sinfônica Brasileira (OSB), was publicly boycotted by the orchestra. The musicians were protesting Minczuk’s initiative to raise the orchestra’s playing level through individual evaluations and consequent sackings. In a Youtube video titled Bye, bye, Minczuk! Viva a OSB!, we see Minczuk take the podium and shake the concert master’s hand amidst the audience’s mixed chorus of cheers and boos. As Minczuk raises his hands to prepare the downbeat, at least half of the orchestra leaves the stage with their instruments.

Compared to the aforementioned cultural boycotts, this is quite a literal protest schweigen. A real-time expectation of sound production is denied. The silence is physical as well as symbolic. Minczuk dropped his hands to an empty downbeat – the silence of those who chose not to play. The protest was for and by those who were physically present. In the previous examples, musicians performed schweigen to represent their beliefs in a cause. Their sacrifice showed their conviction, but theirs were not the bodies truly at stake. They essentially donated their high visibility to those who have none. In the OSB example, the musicians who left the stage are those whose livelihoods were directly affected by the evaluations. As Butler recognizes, ‘We must claim rights of bodily integrity even if our bodies are never simply our own’. In walking off stage, the musicians claim their bodies in front of witnesses. They begin to exist through their performed choice of silence.

The theatre of duct tape: Visual schweigen

For protests outside the concert hall, the act of schweigen changes from a refusal to make sound to a symbol of obstructed speech. As musicians have the assumed role of sound production, their performance is an act of denying rather than acting out something denied. Whether performed by musicians or non-musicians, schweigen relies heavily on the visual theatre of silence. Without the high visibility of a formal stage, the non-musician protester uses their body as the site of their schweigen act.

A common, contemporary gesture is putting duct tape over one’s mouth. The tape symbolizes the speech act – and, therefore, humanity – being forcibly denied. The mouth is covered, either muffling or silencing the voice; as a producer of speech and expression, its attempts to communicate are stifled. Unlike musicians not playing, the activeness of this schweigen has violent undertones. Duct tape is thick, unpleasant, and difficult and often painful to remove from the skin. In using this material, there is the assumption that one would not voluntarily apply it to one’s face. The message to the viewer is that ‘my silence is being forced upon me against my will’.

But who is forcing whom and to what ends? Duct tape has no inherent political meaning and thus can be used by any movement. Two examples that come to my mind as a native Californian are the pro same-sex marriage NOH8 campaign and the children’s pro-life protests in the 2006 documentary Jesus Camp. Interestingly, both groups employ the same visual schweigen for completely opposite ideological purposes.

Self-described as a ‘photographic silent protest’, the NOH8 campaign is run by a charitable organization that began because of Proposition 8 (a Californian ballot
proposition against same-sex marriage) and remains active ‘to stand against discrimination and bullying of all kinds’. The campaign’s portraits feature the typical duct tape and ‘NOH8’ logo on the subject’s cheek.

Among many images on the website, one particularly leaps out because the sitter is holding a megaphone – an object with inherent sonic implications – up to their duct-taped mouth. If the tape symbolizes their voice being silenced, then the megaphone serves to amplify this oppression. However, we can see the subject’s hand holding up the megaphone, a visual reminder of their actual ability to choose whether or not the duct tape is on their mouth. The megaphone shows that sound should be there. With this, the subject’s portrayal of oppressive silence is amplified, but I feel the activeness in the silence is lost. His prop reminds us that there is no actual sound and yet the photograph documents a self-aware performance, a reminder that detracts from the powerful symbolism of stolen speech.

Unlike the NOH8 campaign which unifies many diverse supporters, protesters in the documentary Jesus Camp are all children. The film follows a Charismatic Christian summer camp where young attendees are indoctrinated with evangelical beliefs, including the opinion that abortion is murder. The campers weep and cover their mouths with red duct tape inscribed with ‘LIFE’, a visual Schweigen that is repeated later when a smaller group of campers and their parents protest in Washington D.C. As the children’s mouths are taped, the camp leader proclaims, ‘The Bible says that out of the mouths of babes, God has ordained praise to silence the enemy and the foe and the avenger. God wants to use the smallest to confound the wise, the things that are nothing to nullify the things that are’. [11] The children’s presence is no circumstance – they are the main act in performing their lack of political power. Since they are too young to vote, they cannot ‘speak’ in government; through their protest Schweigen, they represent themselves and others who demand ‘life’.

So what is being disrupted? Who are the witnesses to bear denial? A visual protest Schweigen needs a ‘stage’ (the body) to be seen so a symbol like duct tape can be ‘heard’. Like the Wilco Facebook post, the audience for the NOH8 photos and Jesus Camp documentary is dispersed. While the effect is different from a concert with a physical audience, this type of long-distance silence can serve the purpose of creating solidarity. Schweigen can be a valuable tool in protest group formation, both for dynamics within the group and for its external perception.

**Schweigen and solidarity**

Schweigen as performative protest can facilitate the shared action of those performing their precarity and those showing solidarity with a movement. It can also be a consolidating tool for protest group dynamics. The activeness in Schweigen can be directed towards listening; one shows solidarity by choosing to remain silent and let someone else speak. By prioritizing another’s voice through one’s own choice of silence, Schweigen shows that a speaker is worth listening to, which is especially valuable if the speaker is not usually heard. Like the music in a concert situation, Schweigen can be used to simultaneously claim power and empower groups in assembly.

Let’s return to the hypothetical choir concert. With the empty downbeat, the audience
and conductor become aware of the unsounding body, a body with potential, choice and knowledge of these traits. It is more than simply a group of people on stage. Butler describes that an inherent body politic forms when people take to the streets in protest ‘and some set of values is being enacted in the form of a collective resistance: a defense of our collective precarity and persistence in the making of equality and the many-voiced and unvoiced ways of refusing to become disposable’. [12]

Although creating a collective, acting body is not easy (as my choir conductor could tell you), the practice of performing music together offers an Arendt-inspired model of ‘the human ability not just to act but to act in concert’. [13] While our bodies might become hidden, whether they are obscured behind instruments, dressed in unifying black clothes or perceived as detached from the physical world through the sheer wonder of ‘virtuosity’, as musicians we must continue to take our visibility seriously.

Performing comes with responsibilities and we have the agency to be responsible. I propose schweigen as a gentle reminder to the music community that none of us is exempt from the political. We are in a unique position to enact the performative. The choir silently standing in view, with its unspoken activeness, performative capabilities and inherent choice is powerful, and refuses to let the non-speaker become disposable.

**Footnotes**


8. ibid., p. 121.


12. ibid., p. 196.


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