



Soundings and silences: A JFK tribute in Dallas

[Saturday](#)
[23-Nov-13](#)
[07:30pm](#)

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[Hall, Dallas, TX](#)
Soundings: New Music at the
Nasher

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[Messiaen, *Quatuor pour la fin du temps \(Quartet for the End of Time\)* for
clarinet, violin, cello and piano](#)

[Cage, *4'33"*](#)

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[Brentano String Quartet](#)
[Charles Neidich, Clarinet](#)
[Seth Knopp, Piano](#)

This weekend, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra marked the 50th anniversary of the assassination, barely a mile from the present-day Arts District, of US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Their program included Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony*, an obvious choice, as well as the Sibelius *Violin Concerto*. Just across Flora Street in City Performance Hall, however, a very different memorial concert unfolded Saturday evening. Soundings, the series that presents biannual concerts at the Nasher Sculpture Center, put on a program of words and music in which silence spoke volumes.

After the four musicians who were to perform Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin*



du temps (“Quartet for the End of Time”) took their seats on stage, a recording was played of Jorge Luis Borges’ poem *In Memoriam, J.F.K.*, an indirect eulogy that recounts a host of assassinations throughout history. As the Messiaen unfolded, we heard interspersed between its movements: wordless sounds recorded at JFK’s funeral; clips from several of the President’s speeches; and his brother Robert F. Kennedy speaking after the killing of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Robert, too, would be felled by an assassin’s bullet within months of his speaking those words). In addition to setting the atmosphere, this device had the practical effect of breaking up the nearly hour-long Messiaen quartet, which even its enthusiasts would likely concede is not easy listening.

The Messiaen did indeed seem to defy time. More fluid passages seemed to float, and slow movements – Messiaen gives the description “inexorably slow” for *Louange à l’Éternité de Jésus* (“Praise to the Eternity of Jesus”) – were trancelike. Mr Neidich’s complete technical and emotional command in *Abîme des oiseaux* (“Abyss of the Birds”) was so transcendent that even such virtuosity couldn’t remind me I was merely at a concert on a Saturday night. His performance was matched in intensity and subtlety by that of his colleagues – violinist Mark Steinberg and cellist Nina Lee of the Brentano String Quartet, and Seth Knopp, pianist and Artistic Director of Soundings.

Intermission cleared the air before the emotional center of the concert, which by design did not feature the playing of a single note. The recording of newsman Walter Cronkite announcing on air JFK’s death was followed by several short clips in which others shared their personal recollections of that day. All the while, the Brentanos sat in pairs to either side of the hall, with four empty chairs on stage. The first half having circumscribed the assassination, this emptiness for the first time illustrated the void of death. After the recordings were finished, the quartet performed John Cage’s *4’33”*, a piece notorious for consisting solely of silence. A minute or two apart, the musicians walked slowly, one by one, onto the stage. The power of silence, of the ritualized nothingness Cage envisioned, was strong.

Performed in a typical concert, *4’33”* is more likely to raise questions than to hint at their answers, but in the context of a memorial it became an exercise in collective grieving. Cronkite’s words, bullet-like, pierced the already elegiac atmosphere, and the silence that followed was almost unbearable. The silence of *4’33”* became the void we have all felt in expecting to hear the voice of a loved one, and realizing this voice – the impression made on the world by that person in sound, their music – is gone. This performance of *4’33”* went beyond the token respectfulness of a moment of silence; its quiet minutes perfectly simulated that moment when what has been lost becomes palpable.

One final recording of JFK's voice broke the silence, and his words were followed by the Brentano Quartet playing Steven Mackey's *One Red Rose*, a new work jointly commissioned by Carnegie Hall, Yellow Barn (the summer festival curated by Mr Knopp), and the Nasher Sculpture Center. In a program note, Mackey described his feelings of admiration at that time for the newly widowed Jackie Kennedy. He sought to convey in this work a sense of the dialogue between opposites – personal and public, and chaos and control. This manifests itself in several ways: the uncertain, shape-shifting ostinatos of the first movement, “Five Short Studies”; the threat of structure dissolving into chaos in “Fugue and Fantasy”, the second movement; and the third movement, titled “Anthem and Aria” – Mackey's respective terms for the public stoicism masking Jackie's inner song of mourning. *One Red Rose* ends with a transcendence of sorts, an ascending and increasingly consonant effusion by the violins, whose Coplandesque sonorities blaze over an open-fifth drone in the lower strings.

Selections from this concert were performed the next day in an event at the Sixth Floor Museum, the room from which Lee Harvey Oswald fired his three shots. As haunting as the Cage and indeed the entire experience had been in City Performance Hall, I can only imagine the effect it had in this far eerier setting.