

Still Life with Silence

Agustín Castilla-Ávila

Instituto Katarina Gurska de Investigaciones Artísticas | Spain

Abstract: In my opinion, in a loud world, in which we live today, silence has the value music used to have traditionally. Which consequences can my beliefs have in my work as a composer? How can I convey as an artist this interchange of the value of music and the value of silence? What can I do as an artist with this value and how can it be represented on the musical graphic score? In this article, I will explain up-to-date about my graphic works “Still Life with Silence” (Still-Leben mit Stille) and analyze some aspects and elements used.

Keywords: Silence, Graphic Music, Still Life.

As I arrived in Salzburg in 2004 to start my compositions studies at the Mozarteum University, my interest about the concept of silence grew considerably. This was possibly influenced by both the song *Silent Night* by F. X. Gruber, which was written in the state of Salzburg and by the fact of arriving in a quiet little town after some years staying in London. I came to the conclusion, that in a loud world, in which we live today, silence has the value music traditionally used to have.

It took four years for my beliefs about the value of silence to be reflected in the graphics of the musical language. In 2008, I was commissioned to write a graphic score for young guitarists for the Guitar Associations' Annual Meeting in Finland. I composed "Sleeping piece", which had the subtitle "This is what happens when a young guitarist falls asleep while practicing". In this work (see figure 1), I included drawings of guitars and other elements without any performing indications. The interpretations of "Sleeping piece" by the young guitarists caused a big impact on me and definitely led me to conceive the works *Still Life with Silence* (Still-Leben mit Stille). In these works, I can be consequent to my beliefs about the current value of silence and interchange the musical graphics of sound and silence.

FIGURE 1 – *Sleeping Piece* for solo guitar, fragment.

The figure displays a musical score for solo guitar, featuring several distinct sections and graphic elements:

- Section 1 (Measures 21-24):** Labeled "PRESTO" with a tempo marking of ♩ = 140. It begins with a circled measure number "21" and a circled "6" above the staff. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a series of eighth notes. A circled "f" (forte) dynamic marking is present below the staff.
- Section 2 (Measures 25-28):** Labeled "LENTO" with a tempo marking of ♩ = 50 and "HARM." (Harmonics). It features a circled "9" above the staff and a circled "pp" (pianissimo) dynamic marking below the staff. The notation includes a treble clef and a key signature of one flat, with a series of notes and a wavy line below the staff.
- Section 3 (Measures 29-32):** Labeled "mp" (mezzo-piano) below the staff. It features a treble clef and a key signature of one flat, with a series of notes and a wavy line below the staff.
- Section 4 (Measures 33-36):** Labeled "pp" (pianissimo) below the staff. It features a treble clef and a key signature of one flat, with a series of notes and a wavy line below the staff.
- Section 5 (Measures 37-40):** Labeled "ANSIOSO" (Anxious) above the staff and "7" above the staff. It features a treble clef and a key signature of one flat, with a series of notes and a wavy line below the staff. A circled "6" is above the staff.
- Section 6 (Measures 41-44):** Labeled "BARTOK PIZZ." (Bartok Pizzicato) above the staff. It features a treble clef and a key signature of one flat, with a series of notes and a wavy line below the staff. A circled "6" is above the staff.

The score is annotated with various graphic elements, including circles around specific measures and dynamic markings, and arrows pointing to specific notes or sections. The wavy lines below the staff represent a graphic element of the score.

Source: CASTILLA-ÁVILA, AGUSTÍN (2008)

I exclusively created *Sleeping piece* using the music notation software Sibelius. I decided to avoid my handwriting and utilize this music notation software for the patterns of *Still Life with Silence*, claiming, that in case of ambiguity, I would strictly remain in the context of the musical graphic elements.

At the time I am writing this article, my creation counts up to 36 graphic works of the series, which have been exhibited in galleries and museums in eleven countries.¹ All of them are both conceived for visual contemplation and for stage performance.²

1. Composing with values, treating silence (rests) as sounds (notes).

To represent this interchange of the values, I would like to introduce some of the elements, which I often develop in these works:

1. **Quotations:** In numerous occasions, I have "quoted" music passages and "translated" them from the traditional sound graphics to those graphics of silence to represent the interchange of the values. In the case of a portrait (or a representation of a person with the graphics of silence and other musical graphics other than those of sounds), these "quotes" are either very meaningful or give hints about the portrayed. Although I refuse to give instructions for the stage performance of it, especially the quotations may lead to body gestures, which are normally present at a music performance.

¹ Some videos of exhibitions can be found at:

-Municipal Gallery Kharkov, Ukraine. (Opening: 21.08.18): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAXHEI3VVdU>

-Zeit Gallery, Vides Deja Festival 2020. Ligatne, Latvia. (Opening: 04.08.20):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uikZUr_n53A

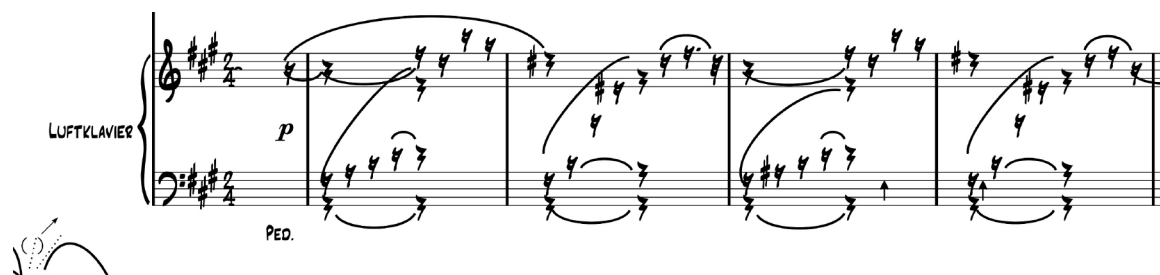
-Fábrica da Criatividade. Castelo Branco, Portugal. (Opening: 03.11.2020):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8bSIVzCmxc>

-Anderson Center. Red Wing, MN, USA (Opening 27.07.22): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kl2hY5xVrII>.

² A video of a performance of *Still Life with Silence (Portrait of Zaira and Eliot)* by Norio Sato and Gaku Yamada at a concert at Ryogoku Monten Hall, Tokyo (Japan), can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5QxnguyEkY>

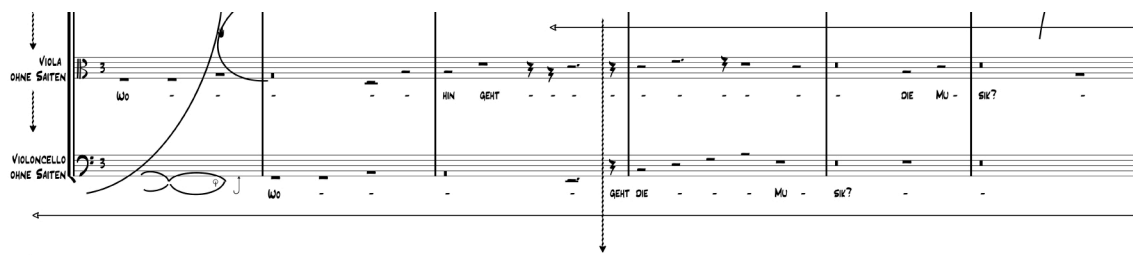
FIGURE 2 – Detail of a quotation after Robert Schumann’s song *Im wunderschönen Monat Mai*, Op. 48/1 (In the Wondrous Month of May) in *Still Life with Silence (Portrait of Katharina)*, bars 1-4.



Source: CASTILLA-ÁVILA, AGUSTÍN (2013)

2. **Polysiopy:** The rests use strict polyphonic rules, but the word polyphony means “many sounds”. This might be problematic in a time of history where silence is so valuable. I describe it as “inner voice polyphony” or “polysiopy” (meaning “many silences”).

FIGURE 3 – Detail of polyphonic processes in *Still Life with Silence (Portrait of C. Ofenbauer)*, bars 1-6.



Source: CASTILLA-ÁVILA, AGUSTÍN (2008)

3. **A Minute of Silence:** According to the interchange of values between music and silence, in which I believe, a minute of silence³ (a moment of silence or a one-minute silence), a period of silent contemplation, prayer, or meditation, should represent a concentration of respectful thoughts in one’s mind during this time and should have the same graphic value music has or used to have. In

³ A moment of silence (also referred to as a minute’s silence or a one-minute silence) is a period of silent contemplation, prayer, reflection, or meditation. Similar to flying a flag at half-mast, a moment of silence is often a gesture of respect, particularly in mourning for those who have died recently, or as part of a tragic historical event, such as the September 11 attacks of 2001. During a moment of silence, its participants may typically bow their heads, remove their hats and refrain from speaking or moving for the duration of it. The first recorded instance of an official moment of silence dedicated to a dead person took place in Portugal on February 13, 1912. The Portuguese Senate dedicated 10 minutes of silence to José Maria da Silva Paranhos Júnior, baron of Rio Branco, Brazil, and Minister of the Exterior of the Brazilian government, who’d died three days earlier on February 10. This moment of silence was registered in the Senate’s records of that day. “Debates Parlamentares - Diário 039, p. 2 (1912-02-13)”.

the case of *In Memoriam Nikolaus Harnoncourt*, I included a quote from Henry Purcell's *Canzona* from *Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary*, interchanging the graphics of the sounds and those of silence (the sounding quotation of Henry Purcell has a duration of one minute). This particular quotation expresses my gratitude to Nikolaus Harnoncourt for introducing me to the music of Henry Purcell through his recordings in my youth years. I also incorporated pictorial elements representing the "ascension" of his soul.

FIGURE 4 – A written Minute of Silence, *Still Life with Silence (In Memoriam N. Harnoncourt)*.

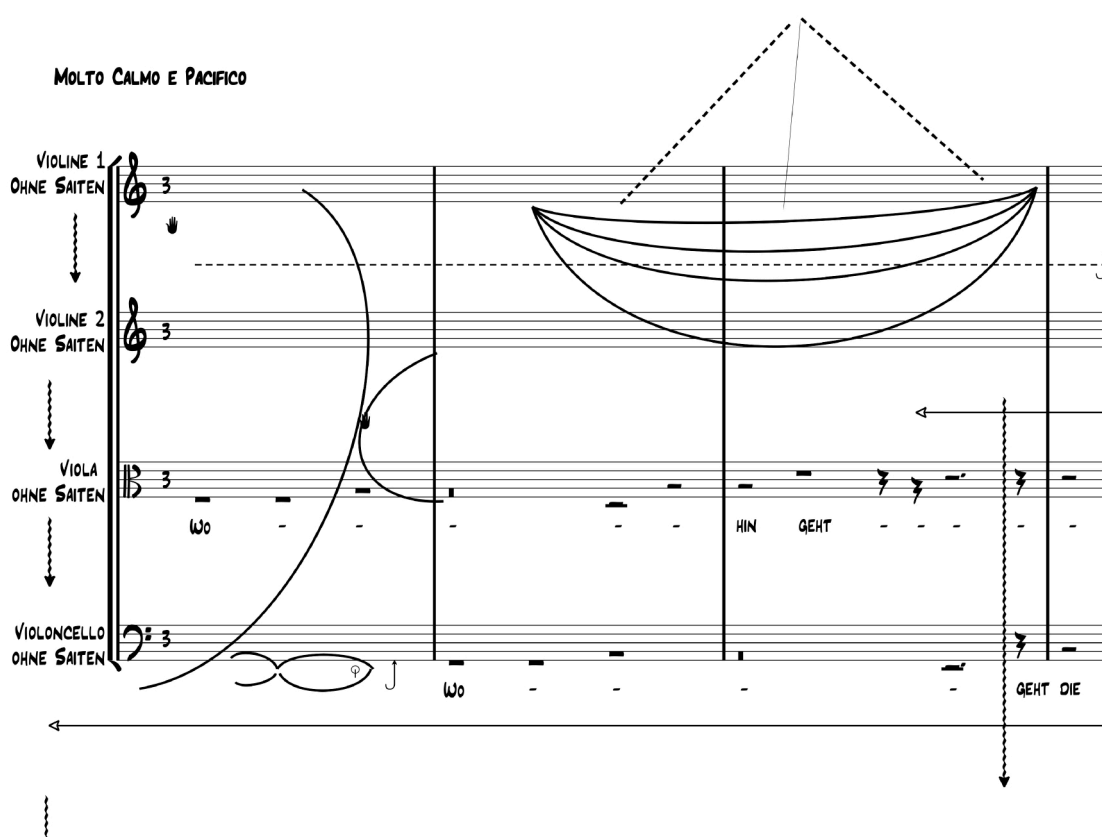
Source: CASTILLA-ÁVILA, AGUSTÍN (2016)

4. **Instrumentation:** That the instruments in the scores of *Still Life with Silence* are not intended to sound physically; it allows me to expand limitless the range of the instrumentation. In the case of the previous score, it can be observed that it is written not just for traditional instruments like cello and viola de gamba (instruments the dedicatee used to play) but also for “angels choir” and “angels trumpets”, which have a pictorial association to numerous paintings in art history. How these elements are represented on the stage (as the works are both intended for visual contemplation and

stage performance) are completely left to the interpretation of the performers; I give no indications for it.

On the score *Still Life with Silence (Portrait of C. Ofenbauer)*, I have intentionally modified the instrumentation to focus on the music terminology: A formation consisting of two violins, one viola and one cello is defined as "string quartet". The piece is written for instruments without strings ("Ohne Saiten" in German), which arises one question: Should this ensemble be called "String Quartet without Strings"? If the strings are not present, the bow enhances its importance. In fact, it is an essay about the meaning of the bow in music, both physical and graphically (legato bows form different pictorial elements to be interpreted by the viewer). Silence and bow are two main elements of Kyūdō (Japanese Archery), which is practiced by the dedicatee.

FIGURE 5 – Detail of the instrumentation in *Still Life with Silence (Portrait of C. Ofenbauer)*, bars 1-3.



Source: CASTILLA-ÁVILA, AGUSTÍN (2008)

2. Composing for the inner voice

Still Life with Silence gives me an opportunity to manifest my personal opinion about a discussion, in which I have taken part in innumerable occasions: Artificial Intelligence will hear our inner voice at some point. With "Writing for the inner voice" I try to show my disagreement to this argument giving as much attention as possible to it. If musicians have to perform many of the works of *Still Life with Silence*, they will not reproduce the written music in the physical world but in their heads (this might lead to more body gestures in the stage interpretation as these are recorded in musicians). There is an event from 2013, which caused a big impact on me and in my ideas about the representation of the inner voice: during rehearsals of my work *The Rest is Silence* (the first existing silent opera, written entirely with rests) the singers were rehearsing (without any indications by myself) the rests playing on the piano approximate pitches corresponding to the location and duration of the rests memorize what they could hear in their heads and then silently reproduce on the stage.

In the previously mentioned score *Still Life with Silence (Portrait of C. Ofenbauer)*, I allowed myself to use a text for this representation of the inner voice expressing our freedom in art in the XXI Century:

FIGURE 6 – Detail of the text "Wohin geht die Musik (Where is Music going) in *Still Life with Silence (Portrait of C. Ofenbauer)*, bars 1-6.



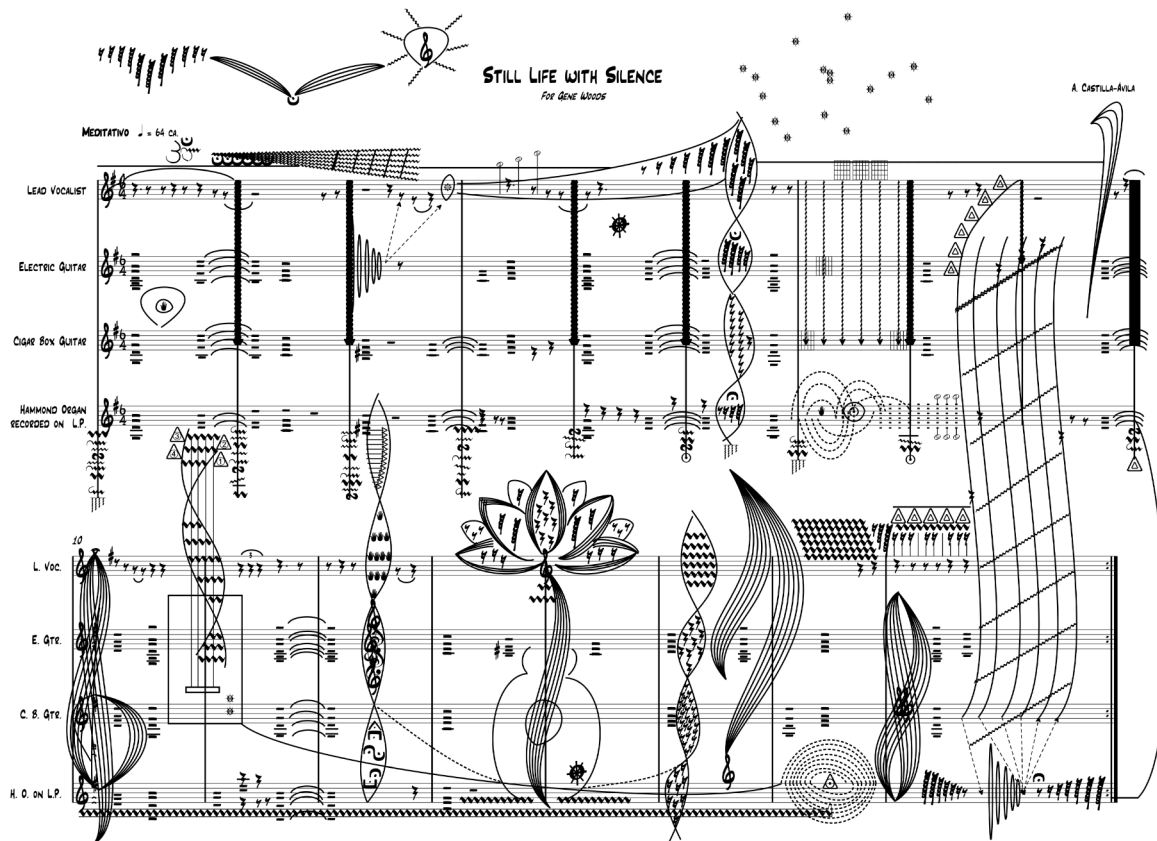
Source: CASTILLA-ÁVILA, AGUSTÍN (2008)

3. Portraits, landscapes - Stimulating the fantasy

In *Still Life with Silence*, I define as portrait a set of symbols and elements telling a story connected to the person I want to portray: instrumentation, quotations, etc., placing the musical graphics in a pictorial context. In the same way, these elements might also represent a landscape.

Here are some examples of these uses:

FIGURE 7 – *Still Life with Silence (Portrait of Gene Woods)*



Source: CASTILLA-ÁVILA, AGUSTÍN (2020)

The first example, *Still Life with Silence (Portrait of Gene Woods)*, I reproduced a meditative background made of Buddhist symbols and evoked the string theory connected to the strings of the instruments and the vibrations they produce. These waves all around represent the meaning of our recorded genetic information and how we can record it forward. All this elements and symbols are strongly associated to the person portrayed.

The next two examples are what I define as landscape. The first one, *Still Life with Silence (Notturmo)* is written after Guber's carol *Silent Night* (Instrumentation, quotations, etc.) with a sky Christmas landscape of the chapel in Oberndorf, where the song was composed. The work was created in 2018 to celebrate its 200 anniversary.

In the second landscape, *Silence on the Stage of the World, Landscape of Salzburg in April 2020*, I use no instrumentation, symbols or elements like in the previous examples. The rests form

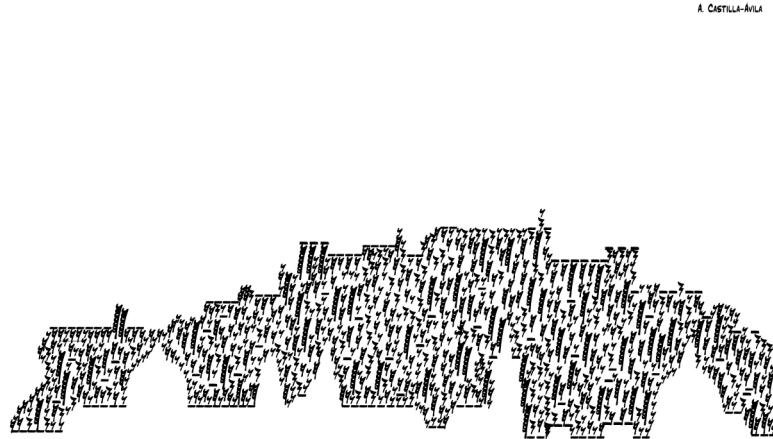
the shape of the logo of the landscape of Salzburg (the so-called "Stage of the World"). It represents the silence on concert halls caused by the lockdown due to the pandemic of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

FIGURE 8 – *Still Life with Silence (Notturmo)*

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Still Life with Silence (Notturmo)" by Agustín Castilla-Ávila. The score is arranged in two systems, each with three staves: Soprano (SOPRAN), Alto (ALT.), and Still Organ (STILLE ORGEL). The tempo is marked "MODERATO". The title "STILL-LEBEN MIT STILLE (NOTTURMO)" is centered at the top, with the composer's name "A. CASTILLA-ÁVILA" to the right. The score is annotated with various musical notations, including dynamics like *p* and *f*, and performance instructions such as "Turn". The score is visually integrated with a night sky illustration featuring a crescent moon, stars, and a comet. In the second system, a line drawing of a church with a dome is overlaid on the musical staves, with lines connecting specific notes to architectural elements of the building.

Source: CASTILLA-ÁVILA, AGUSTÍN (2018)

FIGURE 9 – *Silence on the Stage of the World, Landscape of Salzburg in April 2020*

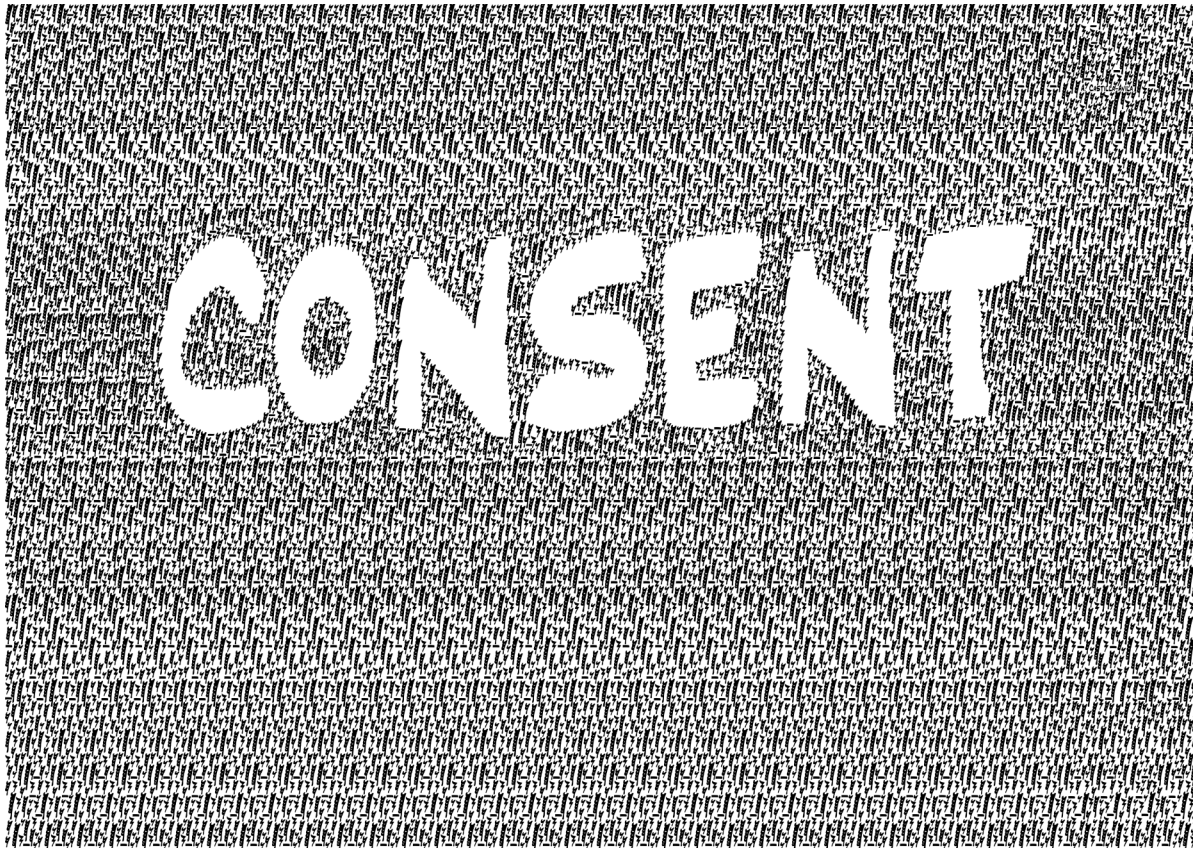


Source: CASTILLA-ÁVILA, AGUSTÍN (2020)

4. The language and the music language

In the same way, in which I formed the silent landscape of Salzburg in April 2020, I used many high-concentrated rests to construct the word “Consent”, representing it as a consequence of silence, after Plato’s quotation “Silence gives Consent”:

FIGURE 10 – *Silence gives consent*



Source: CASTILLA-ÁVILA, AGUSTÍN (2020)

Even if I very much work with silence, I cannot imagine that it can exist anywhere in the universe. If we take the theory of the Big Bang as the beginning of the universe, I assume that ever since all the sounds produced, all the waves and all the echoes expand and remain in the universe. I believe we are all part of a total composition started the moment the universe was born.

In 2020, I was invited to participate in the exhibition *Tributo alla Zappa* in Salzburg. I was enormously impressed about a quotation of his reflecting similar ideas about the universe: "Everything in the universe is, is, is made of one element, which is a note, a single note. Atoms are really vibrations, you know. With your extensions of the BIG NOTE, everything's one note. Everything, even the ponies." (ZAPPA, 2021).

FIGURE 11 – *One Big Rest*

A CASTILLA-ÁVILA



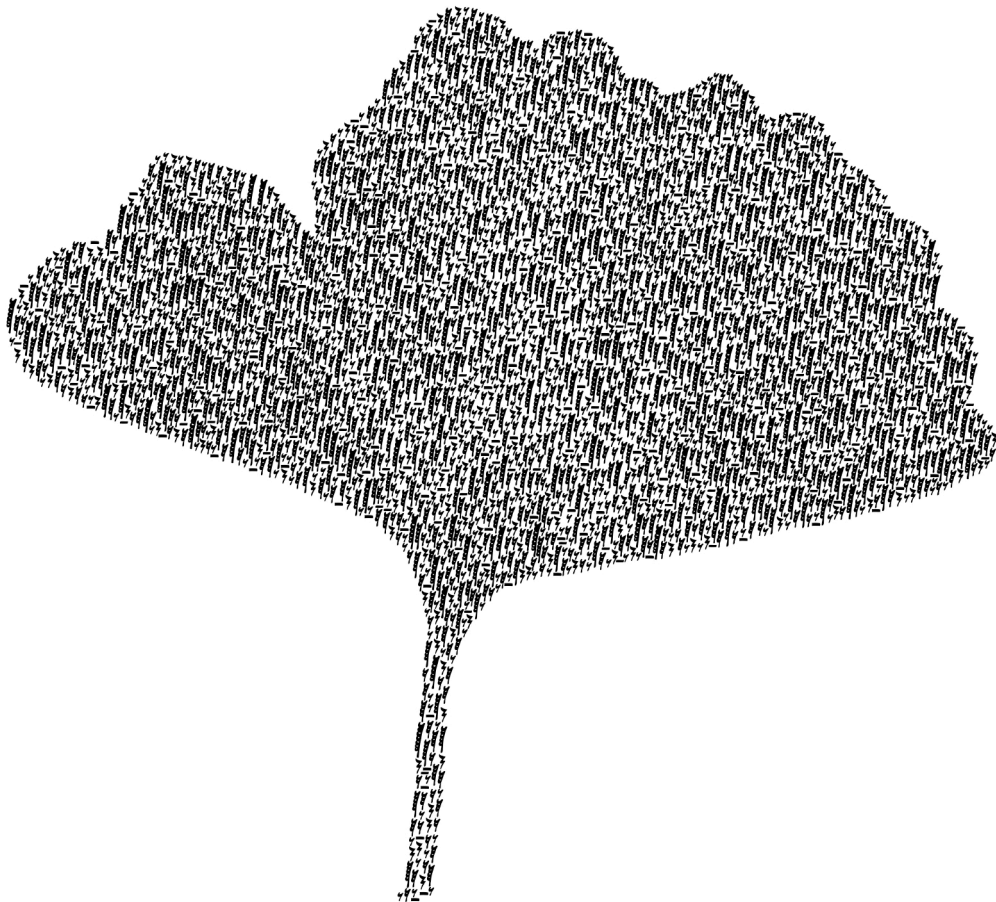
Source: CASTILLA-ÁVILA, AGUSTÍN (2020)

5. The Shape of Silence

In the last two years, I have produced works, in which the rests shape and element strongly connected to silence. As examples, I would like to present two contrasting works. *Ginkgoblatt* (Ginkgo Leaf) is meant to be a meditation. In *Die Stille, die tötet* (The Silence that kills), the rests take the shape of a fist representing silence in a context of oppression and violence.

FIGURE 12 – *Ginkgoblatt*

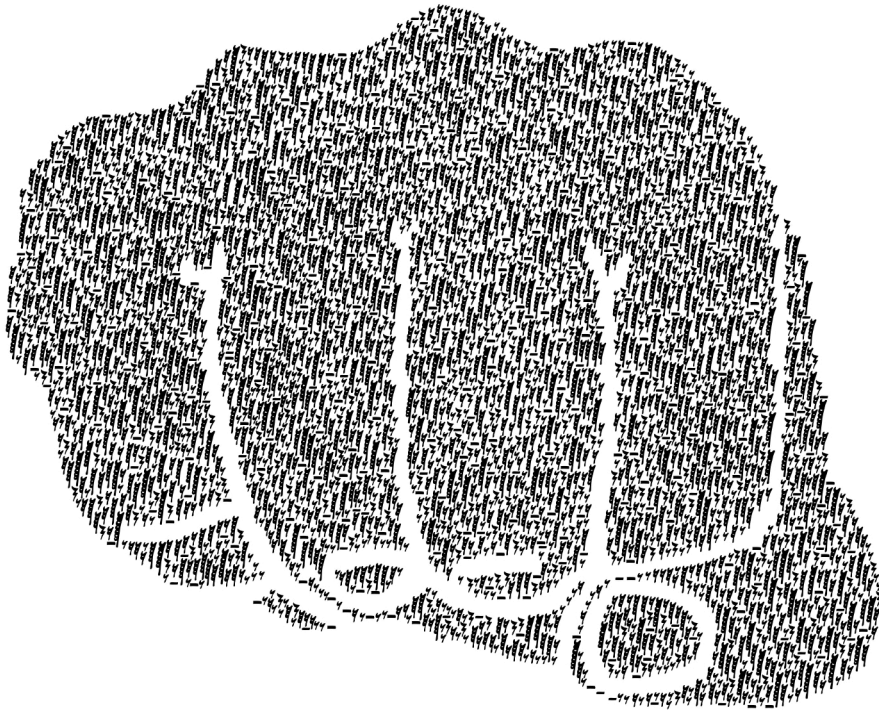
A. CASTILLA-ÁVILA



Source: CASTILLA-ÁVILA, AGUSTÍN (2021)

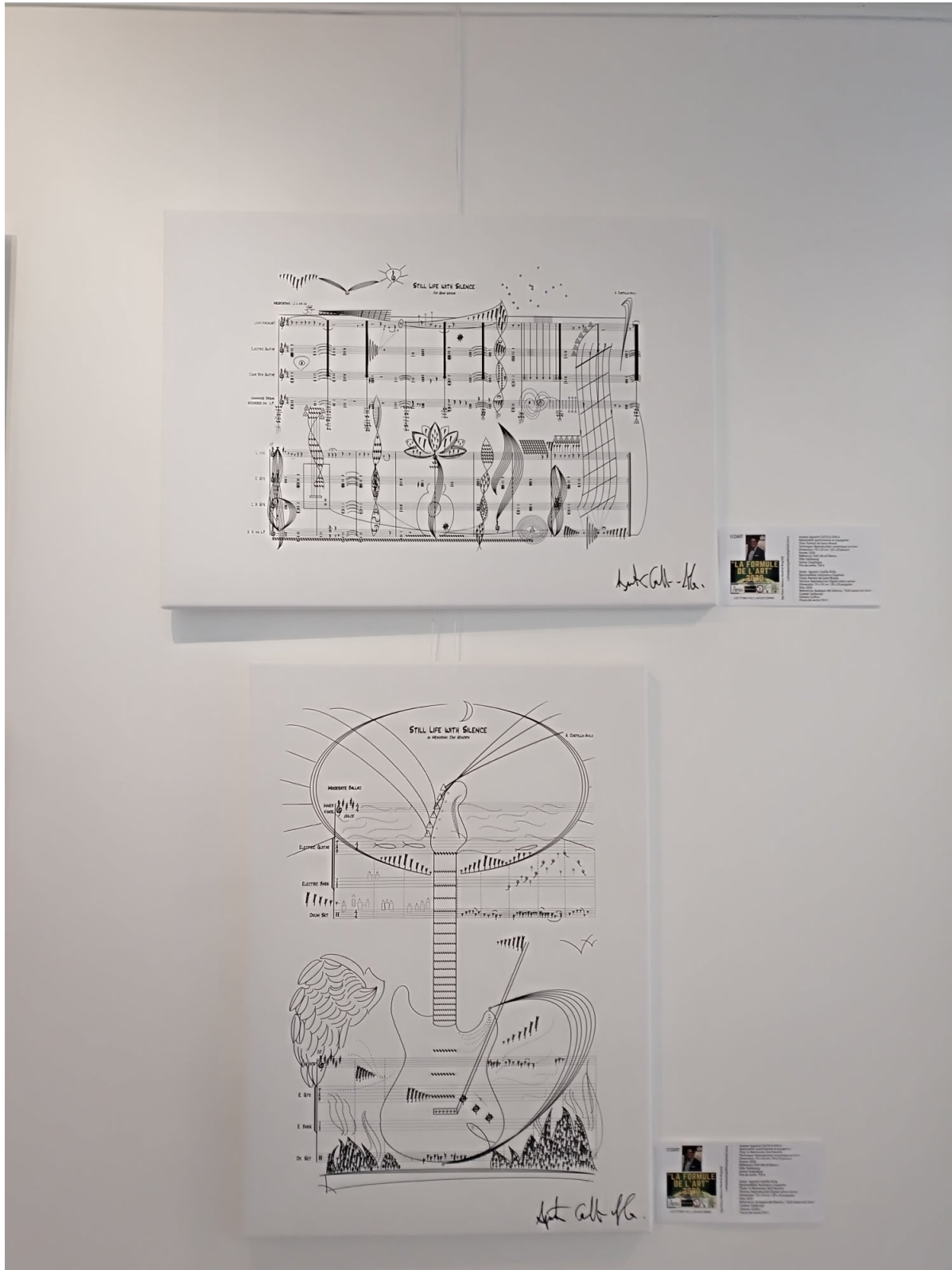
FIGURE 13 – *Die Stille, die tötet*

A. CASTILLA-ÁVILA



Source: CASTILLA-ÁVILA, AGUSTÍN (2021)

FIGURE 14 – *Still Life with Silence (Portrait of Gene Woods)* (2020) and *Still Life with Silence (In Memoriam Jimi Hendrix)* (2020) at the exhibition *La Formule de l'Art* at Arte al Paso Gallery in Paris, France (September 2020).



Source: SILVA, ADRIANA (2020)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Photo at the exhibition "La Formule de l'Art" at Arte al Paso Gallery in Paris, France (September 2020) by Adriana Silva.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Agustín Castilla-Ávila worked as a composer in Europe, Asia and USA. His music was conducted by D. Russell-Davies, J. Kalitzke, T. Ceccherini, A. Soriano, H. Lintu and H. Schellenberger among others. He has written solo and chamber music, orchestral, theater plays, choreographies and five chamber operas. He has published for Doblinger Verlag, Bergmann Edition, Mackinger Verlag, Da Vinci Edition, Verlag Neue Musik and Joachin Trekel. His music has been

recorded on sixteen CDs and three DVDs. In 2013 he was awarded by the Region of Salzburg with the Music Jahresstipendium. He is president of the Internationale Gesellschaft für Ekmelische Musik in Salzburg and director of the symposium "Mikrotöne: Small is beautiful" (Editions 2015, 2017, 2019 and 2021) in Salzburg. He has lectured more than a hundred times in thirty countries, including at universities such as Juilliard School in New York, Mozarteum in Salzburg, Yong Siew To Conservatory in Singapore, Boston University, etc. He is currently visiting professor at the Instituto de Investigaciones Artísticas Katarina Gurska in Spain. His exhibition "Still Life with Silence" was shown in countries such as Japan, Ukraine, Austria, Spain, Portugal, USA, Mexico, etc.

www.castilla-avila.com. E-mail: castillaavila@hotmail.com

APPENDIX

List of Exhibitions

-September 22 (individual):

KoncertKirken. Copenhagen, Denmark

-July 22 (individual):

Anderson Center. Red Wing MN, USA

-October 21 (group, "Mondes Parallèles"):

Espace 7 Gallery. Paris, France

-September 21 (group, "Art Nest"):

Le Village Suisse (International Art Gallery). Paris, France

-June 21 (group, "Traverser ton Miroir"):

Cassiopée Café-Galerie. Paris, France

-May 21 (group, "Traverser ton Miroir"):

Espace 7 Gallery. Paris, France

-November 20 (group, "Tributo alla Zappa"):

KHG-Galerie Salzburg, Austria

-October 20 (individual):

Fábrica da Criatividade. Castelo Branco, Portugal

-September 20 (group, "La Formule de l'Art"):

Arte al Paso Gallery. Paris, France

-August 20 (individual):

Zeit Gallery. Festival "Vides Deja", Līgatne, Latvia

-October 19 (group, "Diplomatie in Bildern"):

Kavalierhaus Klessheim Salzburg, Austria

-October 19 (individual):

Museo Na Bolom. San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico

-August 19 (individual):

Tres50 Espacio Cultural. Chiapa de Corzo, Mexico

List of Exhibitions (cont.)

-June 19 (group):

Shakespeare. Salzburg, Austria

-March 19 (individual):

Museo Regional de Chiapas. Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Mexico

-December 18 (group):

Sigl-Haus Museum. St. Georgen bei Salzburg, Austria

-November 18 (individual):

Instituto Cervantes. Lisbon, Portugal

-September 18 (individual):

Ryogoku Monten Hall. Tokyo, Japan

-August 18 (individual):

Kharkov City Gallery. Kharkov, Ukraine

-January 18 (individual):

Galería Arte a Diario. Jerez, Spain

-November 16 (group):

KHG-Galerie Salzburg, Austria

-April 16 (group, "Musica con Vista"):

Sala Ammannati del Palazzo Ducale. Lucca, Italy

-June 10 (group, "AIR"):

Kultur Bundesministerium, Vienna, Austria

-16.10.09 (group):

Tag der jungen Kultur. Salzburg, Austria