

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Sound of Almost Nothing: Silence and Expectation in Classical String Quartets

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Abstract

Silence in chamber music is easily treated as an absence between meaningful sounds, although rests, fermatas, withdrawal, and re-entry can reorganize ensemble action. This article asks how composed silence acquires formal meaning in selected public-domain string quartets by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. The method compares rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and ensemble re-entries in relation to what prepares and follows each pause. The analysis finds that silence derives force from the process it interrupts; re-entry redistributes agency among players after a pause; and later silences can recall earlier interruptions and thereby participate in formal memory. These findings distinguish locatable notated events from psychological or reception claims that would require additional evidence. The article contributes an account of silence as an event within ensemble syntax rather than an empty interval, while acknowledging that the generic score references and absence of exact quartet, edition, movement, and measure locators prevent passage-level verification in the present form.

Keywords: silence; string quartet; expectation; ensemble agency; re-entry; chamber music

1 Introduction

This comparative study addresses how notated silence redirects expectation within conversational chamber textures. Its corpus comprises selected public-domain quartet movements by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. The central claim is that silence acquires meaning from the process it interrupts. That proposition has force because absence in notation can be a positive compositional event rather than an empty interval. Attention therefore falls on rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries.

The analytical problem is intentionally narrower than a general history of active silence. Within this repertoire, composed silence is assessed through rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries. Its definition changes only when those features alter the interpretation.

Three interpretive results guide what follows. First, silence acquires meaning from the process it interrupts. Second, ensemble re-entry redistributes agency after a pause. Third, late silence can recall earlier interruptions and thereby participate in form. Taken together, active silence is neither a decorative effect nor a label attached after interpretation. The argument remains proportionate to the repertoire.

Accordingly, the guiding question is: How does composed silence reorganize expectation and ensemble agency rather than merely suspend sound? The objective is to answer it by comparing rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries in their immediate formal sequences across selected public-domain string quartets by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. The article argues that silence gains meaning from interruption and aftermath: re-entry redistributes agency, and later pauses can recall earlier ones. The contribution is to treat silence as part of formal and ensemble syntax rather than as an empty duration. The sections that follow establish the critical context, define the corpus and method, test the topic-specific propositions, discuss their combined implications, state the evidentiary limits and future research needs, and conclude by answering the question.

Silence in chamber music is interpreted through both expectation and ensemble agency. Klorman's account of social interplay in Mozart's chamber works provides a model for hearing individual parts as interacting agents [1]. Meyer's theory of musical expectation explains why interruption and delayed continuation can produce formal significance [2].

2 Silence, Expectation, and Ensemble Agency

The central difficulty for *The Sound of Almost Nothing* is inferential distance. Rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries are observable in the consulted sources, whereas the account of composed silence interprets how those observations connect. The article closes that distance in stages: it identifies a feature, locates its structural neighbors, describes the change it produces, and only then names its historical or aesthetic effect. A claim fails when any link in that chain depends on information absent from the cited edition, score, image, film, interface, or performance document.

Terminological precision is necessary for *The Sound of Almost Nothing*. Composed silence is distinguished from recurrence, theme, and context. Recurrence identifies repetition; theme identifies a field of concern; context situates the work historically. The present argument instead asks how rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries acquire a role through their connection to neighboring events. The distinction does not rank one form of criticism above another. It specifies the task of this article and prevents evidence gathered for one question from being used as automatic proof of another.

3 Composed Silence in Selected String Quartets

The corpus comprises selected string quartets by Joseph Haydn [3], Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart [4], Ludwig van Beethoven [5], and Franz Schubert [6]. The analytical framework brings together theories of formal function, musical meaning, and interpretive practice. Caplin's theory of formal function supports the analysis of beginnings, continuations, and cadential processes [10], while Hepokoski and Darcy provide a comparative vocabulary for examining formal norms and their deformation [11]. Hatten's account of markedness and musical meaning guides the interpretation of relationships between formal contrast and expressive significance [9]. Kerman's defense of interpretive criticism supports the movement from formal description to proportionate argument [7], while Cook's account of analytical practice enables comparison without treating any single method as exhaustive [8].

The primary corpus is selected public-domain quartet movements by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. Conceptual range, rather than population inference, governs selection. Each item offers a distinct configuration of active silence and permits comparison through the common unit of rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries.

Analysis proceeds through comparative score reading that relates silence to phrase function, ensemble role, register, and harmonic implication.

Composed silence is tested through observable changes in rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries. The process records position, recurrence, interruption, and consequence before assigning interpretive weight. That order matters for the score comparison: a repeated feature may retain its appearance while changing function, whereas a single event at a boundary may redirect the whole sequence. The critical vocabulary is drawn only from scholarship that bears on the named compositional problem. Claims about intention, reception, or prevalence are withheld unless the cited sources supply that evidence.

The evidentiary chain for *The Sound of Almost Nothing* runs from source identification to description and only then to interpretation. A page, measure, frame, accession record, or production document is not decorative citation detail; it lets another reader locate the event on which the claim about composed silence depends.

Missing locators therefore mark a limit in the current draft. They should be resolved against the exact versions actually consulted, never supplied by approximation.

4 Silence acquires meaning from the process it interrupts

The initial finding may be summarized as follows: silence acquires meaning from the process it interrupts. This temporal dimension is essential. The finding therefore concerns organization, not inventory.

The resulting form is recursive. Interpretation advances, but it also returns to revise what seemed settled. This recursive quality explains why active silence can remain coherent without becoming predictable.

The Sound of Almost Nothing treats the claim that silence acquires meaning from the process it interrupts as an account of compositional pressure. The question is not simply where rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries can be found, but how neighboring events make them expectable, delayed, displaced, or newly prominent. The proposition gains force when a local change reorganizes the reader's, listener's, or viewer's grasp of the larger score instance. If no such result can be described, the evidence remains an inventory item rather than an argument about composed silence.

5 The Sound of Almost Nothing

The initial case is Joseph Haydn's *Selected String Quartets*. The reading tests the proposition that silence acquires meaning from the process it interrupts by restricting attention to rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries. It then identifies which surrounding relations are necessary for that account.

In Joseph Haydn's *Selected String Quartets*, the proposition that silence acquires meaning from the process it interrupts is evaluated through placement, not keyword recurrence. The reading asks what prepares each occurrence of rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries, which agent or compositional layer controls it, and what consequence follows. A detail counts as evidence only when its surrounding sequence changes the available judgment. This restriction prevents the case from being reduced to an example chosen after the thesis was formed.

A close reading of Joseph Haydn's *Selected String Quartets* must therefore document the first relevant occurrence

of rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries, the expectation active at that moment, and the result that distinguishes it from background recurrence. The case supports *The Sound of Almost Nothing* only if those three points can be located in the consulted version. A general parallel to the other cases is not enough; the segment must show why the proposition about composed silence is necessary to explain its organization.

The following case, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Selected String Quartets*, tests the distributive dimension of the argument. Here the governing question is whether ensemble re-entry redistributes agency after a pause. This is not handled as a defect in reliability.

The case drawn from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Selected String Quartets* changes the scale of comparison. Here composed silence is read through the distribution of access, emphasis, and response among scores. The relevant question is not whether the same surface feature returns, but whether its return gives a different participant, voice, register, or position the capacity to redirect interpretation. That distributive test supplies the pressure behind the claim that ensemble re-entry redistributes agency after a pause.

For Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Selected String Quartets*, the principal counter-reading treats the observed distribution as a genre convention with no special bearing on composed silence. The article answers only at the level of rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries: it asks whether a transfer of access or emphasis produces a later effect that convention alone leaves unexplained. If it does not, the second proposition contracts. If it does, the case clarifies how compositional hierarchy becomes an event rather than a static arrangement.

A further comparison focuses on Ludwig van Beethoven's *Selected String Quartets* and gives priority to revision over initial recognition. The interpretive test is whether late silence can recall initial interruptions and thereby participate in form.

The value of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Selected String Quartets* is retrospective. Subsequent passages are reread against the first account of rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries, allowing the article to distinguish repetition from revision. If the subsequent event merely restates the prior one, the proposition that late silence can recall prior interruptions and

thereby participate in form receives little support. If it changes the status of what the reader, listener, or viewer already encountered, the case makes visible how composed silence acquires organizational memory.

Verification in Ludwig van Beethoven's Selected String Quartets requires two locators: one for the initial treatment of rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries and one for the moment that alters its status. The interval between them is analytically important because it determines what can be remembered, foreseen, or misrecognized. Recording both locations prevents the later reading from being projected backward as if it had been available from the start, and it gives the claim about composed silence a visible temporal basis.

The last case, Franz Schubert's Selected String Quartets, functions as a resistant comparison.

Franz Schubert's Selected String Quartets remains in the selection because it resists easy synthesis. Its treatment of rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries tests how far the claim that silence acquires meaning from the process it interrupts can travel before medium, genre, or historical circumstance demands qualification. The comparison does not convert resistance into confirmation. It records which part of the proposition remains, which part contracts, and which other source would be necessary to distinguish between rival explanations.

The resistant role of Franz Schubert's Selected String Quartets also limits the article's vocabulary. If medium or genre changes the operation of rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries, the comparison names that difference before proposing an analogy. The case may therefore support only part of the claim that silence acquires meaning from the process it interrupts. Such partial support is informative: it identifies the condition under which composed silence ceases to explain the evidence and marks the point where another historical or organizational account should take over.

6 Ensemble re-entry redistributes agency after a pause

The second claim holds that ensemble re-entry redistributes agency after a pause. This pattern shifts analysis from isolated form toward distribution. The repertoire repeatedly makes such allocation perceptible.

Distribution gives the second result its precision. The claim that ensemble re-entry redistributes agency after a pause calls for more than a contrast between dominant and subordinate positions. It calls for evidence that the contrast changes what can be known, heard, seen, said, or answered. In *The Sound of Almost Nothing*, rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries make that change traceable. A transfer matters when it reallocates initiative or credibility; otherwise it remains a surface variation. This threshold protects the argument about composed silence from turning every difference into hierarchy.

7 Late silence can recall earlier interruptions and thereby participate in form

The final result argues that late silence can recall preceding interruptions and thereby participate in form. Return, correction, reframing, and delayed outcome are therefore analytical events. They reveal how a work stores difference and activates it later.

In combination, these results form a sequence of their own. The first identifies a process that directs attention. The second reveals that attention and authority are distributed. The third explains how later events revise that distribution. This sequence supports the central thesis that active silence is historically variable and formally organized.

The test for the third claim is counterfactual: if the subsequent event were removed, would the earlier reading of rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries remain unchanged? A negative answer supports the proposition that late silence can recall earlier interruptions and thereby participate in form; a positive answer weakens it. *The Sound of Almost Nothing* uses this test to distinguish memory built by form from similarity noticed by the critic. The distinction has force for composed silence, because retrospective force belongs to the organized sequence and not simply to the reader's ability to place examples side by side.

8 Discussion

Read as a sequence, the results move from form to allocation and then to revision. The first establishes that silence acquires meaning from the process it interrupts; the second, that ensemble re-entry redistributes agency after a pause; the third, that late silence can recall preceding interruptions and thereby participate

in form. This order prevents composed silence from becoming a label applied after interpretation. It names a chain of decisions whose consequences can be checked against the scores and analytical observations.

The comparative result is that absence in notation can be a positive compositional event rather than an empty interval. This result does not depend on universal agreement about every example.

The argument is deliberately vulnerable to revision. If silence acquires meaning from the process it interrupts appears only after examples are removed from sequence, the first claim weakens. If ensemble re-entry redistributes agency after a pause cannot be tied to a visible allocation of access, emphasis, or agency, the second becomes thematic summary. If late silence can recall initial interruptions and thereby participate in form depends on knowledge unavailable at the relevant moment, the third becomes retrospective overreach. These failure conditions define what would count against *The Sound of Almost Nothing*, not only what appears to support it.

The article contributes a distinction between appearance, function, and consequence. Appearance concerns what can be described in rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries; function concerns the connection established by its placement; consequence concerns the judgment that becomes possible afterward. *The Sound of Almost Nothing* uses this distinction to prevent composed silence from collapsing into a synonym for theme, mood, or context. The three levels may converge, but the argument does not assume that they do so in every work.

The process also separates comparison from equivalence. Cases are comparable because each poses a problem involving composed silence, not because their historical conditions or compositional resources are interchangeable. *The Sound of Almost Nothing* preserves those differences by defining the shared question at the level of function and the answers at the level of rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries. This arrangement permits synthesis without claiming that one vocabulary exhausts the work of every text, score, image, film, or performance.

The score comparison's main limitation is that the perceived duration and intensity of silence vary with performance and acoustic setting. It does not establish reception, intention, prevalence, or causal effect. The absence of those methods is acknowledged rather than disguised.

The argument remains accountable because each inference can be challenged at the scale of rests, fermatas, textural withdrawal, interrupted continuations, and re-entries. A counter-reading must explain the same placement and sequence, not merely supply a different label. This standard neither turns interpretation into measurement nor treats judgment as private response. It makes disagreement about composed silence specific enough to revise.

9 Conclusion

The score comparison began by asking how notated silence redirects expectation within conversational chamber textures. Through comparative score reading that relates silence to phrase function, ensemble role, register, and harmonic implication, it argued that silence acquires meaning from the process it interrupts; that ensemble re-entry redistributes agency after a pause; and that late silence can recall preceding interruptions and thereby participate in form. These claims converge on a relational account of active

silence.

The broader conclusion is that absence in notation can be a positive compositional event rather than an empty interval.

The comparison answers the question by showing that silence becomes formal when interruption and re-entry change expectation and redistribute ensemble action. Later pauses can also carry memory of earlier ones. This sequence-based account is the article's contribution. Because exact works, editions, measures, and performances are unspecified, the claims remain programmatic; a locator-rich corpus and performance comparison are required next.

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