Oregon Musician

Sharing ideas about music and the teaching of music

Listening

The Editor's Comments

About the Editor

Dr. Diane Baxter, pianist, educator and consultant, is the editor of *Oregon Musician.* She is Professor Emerita of Music at Western Oregon University where she received the Faculty Honors Award for Outstanding Creativity and the Pastega Award for Excellence in Teaching. Dr. Baxter has adjudicated the Woodley Festival in Berkshire, England on four occasions, most recently in 2022. Each festival includes at least 300 pianists of all ages—she eats a lot to keep up her strength. Diane performs and teaches in France each summer, and in 2018 she began international annual workshops on the shores of Loch Etive in the Scottish Highlands. In 2023, after the Scottish workshops concluded, Dr. Baxter went to Oxford, England where she was invited to speak for The Music Faculty at the University of Oxford on the topic "How to Prepare for Just About Anything: The Pianist as Athlete." Closer to home, Diane writes the program notes for *Corvallis Piano International* and continues to perform as principal keyboardist for the Newport Symphony. She lives, writes, plays and thinks in Brownsville, Oregon.

Beauty makes everything easier.

—Philippe Jost
Construction worker on Notre Dame reconstruction

The topic is listening for this edition of *The Oregon Musician*. It came to mind as I left the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo, the center which honors the Peace Prize recipients. When Alfred Nobel died in 1896, he wanted his massive wealth to be distributed annually to those who, "during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind." Awards are in physics, chemistry, medicine or physiology, literature, and peace. The Nobel Peace Prize is for "the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between the nations and the abolition or reduction of standing armies and the formation and spreading of peace congresses." As you near the exit, there is a large poster:

Figure 1. Nobel Peace Center, Oslo, Norway.

Are you listening?

1. Listen to what is being said. Do not let your own thoughts and prejudices interfere with your ability to listen.
2. Do not give advice unless it is requested.
3. Do not interrupt. Let the other person finish speaking.
4. Do not take over the conversation by drawing parallels to your own experiences. Allow the other person their time; you will get yours.
5. Be empathetic and show understanding for the other person's situation. Try to understand the other person without becoming upset yourself.
6. Do not presume to know other people's opinions.

I was immediately struck by the notion of listening as a contributor to peace. Musicians build their lives on listening. We know silence is as critical as sound—this is a

powerful distinguishing characteristic in Beethoven's music. In other words, we listen to absence. But it isn't absence. It is space for communication.

We hear things, all the time. Hearing is passive reception. It becomes listening with active thought.

We can think of ourselves as "receivers," like radios. But Rainer Maria Rilke makes a distinction. He described himself this way. Human receivers do not have to be chosen, nor brilliant—they just have to be activated. In this way, listening has special potential because it mixes us up with the world; it is a way of being vulnerable to whatever lies outside us. "The ears have no eyelids" (Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening* 2002). Dame Evelyn Glennie, the Scottish percussionist, states: "My aim really is to teach the world to listen." Speaking as a deaf musician she highlights the notion that there is a difference between hearing and listening. She speaks about how she hears with her entire body and she sometimes gets exasperated when interviewers push her about her deafness. She once told a particularly insistent interviewer that if he wanted to know so much about hearing he should speak to an audiologist—"I am a musician." Dame Glennie often performs barefoot so that she can hear better.

Listening is a crucial way to gather information—whether that be through the ears or eyes or feet, it allows us to interact with the world. When you visit Troldhaugen, Grieg's home outside Bergen, Norway, you can visit his composer's hut. This lovely and appealing studio is settled down on the edge of a fjord below the house. On the piano bench in the studio there is a large hardbound volume of Beethoven sonatas that Grieg sat on when he played, claiming that he wanted to have a good foundation. Staring through the little window, if you listen, it's easy to "hear" the music of Grieg. Grieg and his wife's ashes are entombed in a mountainside crypt. In the light of the setting sun over Troldhaugen, I read the stylized Viking runes that record their names. Listening, I knew I was almost in the hall of the mountain king.

Figure 2. Grieg's composer hut overlooking the fjord.

Although we all hear the performers, we each listen differently when we sit in an audience. The experience is individual, and it will change us, differently. It changes time and perceptions, events and their meanings, it embeds memories. It makes us laugh or cry or wonder. Music bonds us and heals us. We talk about it afterwards and discuss the mysteries and beauty within the pieces. The experience is of paramount importance.

In "Listening Unwrapped" Kate Robathan writes poetically and deeply about this topic. In her introduction, she briefly describes hearing, then says: "and that is just about the complex miracle of the sense of hearing. Listening is a whole new game, an art and a skill not a mostly effort-free sense. As I started to think about listening I kept discovering different layers. The craft of listening needs to be worked at, but it is like a game of "pass the parcel," with a little present hidden under each sheet of wrapping paper, with the best kept till last." She ends her inviting essay with this observation about live concerts: "As a member of the audience I feel a whole language of music and intense discovery passing from the hands of the performer to me. Both of us travel on the emotional journey through the soundscape that the composer has created for us. When the last note is played, in that glorious suspension before real life enters in again, the music and the listening carry on through the silence."

Figure 3. Grieg's foundation for composition was a large copy of Beethoven's Sonatas.

In "Learning to Listen: A Lost Art Recovered," Michael Johnson refers to the relationship between recorded and live music. "So much recorded music today ends up in the background but never connects. A comprehensive treatment of regaining that connection is explored in the book *Music: The Art of Listening* by Jean Ferris, a former music history and appreciation professor at Arizona State University. 'Listening to classical music is itself an art,' she writes, 'and good listening is an active, creative experience.'"

Paul Roberts in "Chopin the Nocturnes and Romanticism" says, "With Beethoven as the touchstone, composers of the 19th century created a musical language, without the need for words, that had all the reach of language itself, of poetry—pastoral, lyrical, epic, tragic—and the new genre of the

Figure 4. Grieg's tomb, certainly King of this mountain.

realist novel. Audiences came to expect an experience listening to music that was the equivalent of their reading Byron and Balzac, the best-sellers of the age . . ."

"What I Hear When I Listen to Carnatic Music," by Sriram Khe describes his journey with music and how that changed throughout his life. "In the traditional, conservative, environment in which I was raised in peninsular southern India, in the state of Tamil Nadu, my parents were ardent fans of South Indian Carnatic classical music. In the early years, when our family did not own a turntable or a cassette player, it helped that the government-owned All India Radio network's radio stations played a lot of classical music. In addition to such an immersion, I was an auditing student hanging around when my older sister began her Carnatic music voice lessons. I easily took to Carnatic music at a young age . . . As happens with many teenagers, I began to question my faith. I raised questions about Hinduism, and started reading up about the religion, which quickly expanded into reading up on the world's other religions. With this new awareness, I faced a dilemma when I listened to Carnatic music: There was the melodic music and the improvisations by musicians that I thoroughly enjoyed, versus the religiosity from which I was rapidly moving away. I began to listen to Carnatic music but without bhakti (faith) and not wanting to hear the religion either. What is Carnatic music without faith?"

"Tacit: A Memoir in Sounds," by Jeremy Hatch is an autobiographical reflection on his interactions with silence and sounds around him, beginning in the present and receding into his history. He begins his essay with a quote from John Cage on the premiere of 4'33." *What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out.* Jeremy invites us to hear beauty in the sounds around us. "Sounds like these are always present, and when you attend to them carefully, you will hear the beauty in their interplay. They might even move you, if you listen long enough. But don't take my word for it. Just listen. You'll hear it for yourself."

"Listening: A Path to Divine Recognition" by Charmaine Leclair guides us through the experience of listening via the ancient Indian philosophy of Vedanta, the Vedic scripture *Brihadarnyaka Upanishad*. "Listening to teachings of the Truth can serve as a vantage point from which to view what happens to us; as a touchstone to help us through difficult moments, and as a foundation that can help us turn our experience of life into knowledge, wisdom and joy. Through listening, the sages reassure us, we can ultimately explain the very meaning of our spiritual pursuit." Her exploration is a fascinating mixture of ancient philosophy and contemporary experiences. Her writing reminded me of a quote from Ravi Shankar: "Sound is God."

Enjoy this edition. As always, I welcome your feedback and your ideas, I'm listening. Let me know you're out there. And you keep listening too!

Figure 5. You never know who might be listening!

Listening

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Oregon Musician is produced by the Oregon Music Teachers Association, Inc.

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Listening Unwrapped

by Kate Robathan

About Kate

Kate had aspirations to be a journalist and writer after achieving her Masters in Linguistics but accidentally became an accountant. Always a keen amateur singer and pianist, she continues to seek solace in music. Now a mother of four talented daughters, when she is not working or looking after children, Kate sings in choirs, plays the piano, hits a tennis ball around and plunges into cold water lakes or pools. She lives in London.

When I studied for my Masters in Linguistics at Edinburgh University in the 80s, speech recognition and speech synthesis were still in their infancy. We worked with PAT, (the University's Parametric Artificial Talker), who took up most of a large laboratory, and while I was there the son of PAT was created: SID (Speaker Identification Device), but he was still a sizeable piece of equipment. Input was painstakingly slow and results relatively primitive. This was really not surprising to me at all, bearing in mind the incredibly complex nature of speech recognition. For a person to hear involves sound waves being turned by the structure of the ear into vibrations which are then transformed into electrical signals which the brain can understand as sounds. Furthermore every person's articulation of, say, CAT, sends out a slightly different wave pattern, and if you have a cold or are in a bad mood the wave pattern you create of the word will be different again. The leaps and bounds taken over the last 40 years is incredible. We have come a long way in a short space of time.

And that is just about the complex miracle of the sense of hearing. Listening is a whole new game, an art and a skill, not a mostly effort-free sense. As I started to think about listening I kept discovering different layers. The craft of listening needs to be worked at, but it is like a game of "pass the parcel," with a little present hidden under each sheet of wrapping paper, with the best kept till last.

The first present in the parcel is just for me. This listening still requires intent, but no one else is involved. Every morning, with red lead on the dog and walking shoes on my feet, I set off for the woods, or the beach or the park. As soon as we are past the noise

and confusion of the roads, I slip the lead and have an hour to listen: the bluster of the wind, the snorting and snuffling of an excited spaniel, the crack of razor shells on the sand, of twigs in the wood, or of ice on the puddles and yes, there are a lot of puddles. This is the closest I get to meditation, a sort of mindfulness I can manage. In a time when my phone nags me with text alerts, and pictures and technology bombard my concentration and vision, just listening to the sounds on a walk clears a space in my brain. It worries me that even as I am enjoying the squelch of mud in the grass, my ability to stay tuned has become so hard. My mind tries to railroad me and sidetrack me back to my phone. I am so tempted to check whether I have any new WhatsApps or emails. I have to force my hand away from the distraction of the step count app, which insists on telling me of my progress towards that day's step goal, some arbitrary goal assigned to me by the app god, with neither my permission nor my desire. And yes, sometimes I give in to the temptation of a podcast to keep me company as I tramp the familiar routes. But if I resist I feel lighter and ready for the day when I get home and fling off my shoes. If I have succumbed to the devil in my pocket, then by the time my walk is over, my brain is already composing email responses, sorting out diary changes and churning through internal dialogue. My ears are relegated to passive noise monitoring duty.

The music has stopped, so I unwrap another layer of paper: the art of listening to other people. Listening is not a lonely craft. It is not about just me. The higher skill in listening is collaborative. We all know that a true conversation is one where people not only speak but also listen, with preferably more of the latter than the former. But there are different types of listening. There is listening for a gap in the dialogue just so that you can jump in and tell your scintillating anecdote. There's token listening when you disagree with what is said and cannot wait to say your more important piece instead. Then there is real listening. Listening to understand, to catch the real meaning of what the other person feels or needs to communicate. Listening to move with the conversation rather than speaking to direct the conversation where you want it to go. We know when we haven't got it right, and my children will tell me so without any compunction when I'm in "I know best' mode of conversation. "It's hopeless. You are just not listening to me" brings me up short.

Alternatively "we felt really listened to" is a profound expression of hope: hope that steps have been or will now be made to mend a rift, to solve a problem, or to build bridges. Billy Hutchinson was a member of one of the Loyalist parties involved in the Northern Ireland troubles. He was also brought around the table in the protracted Northern Ireland peace talks in the 1990s. Hutchinson paid George Mitchell, who chaired these peace talks, a huge compliment. Mitchell was sent by President Clinton as special envoy to help broker peace in Northern Ireland, a posting that was meant to take 6 months but took over five years. After success was finally achieved, Billy Hutchinson praised Mitchell and reflected that in effect he "listened us to agreement". In a recent conversation about

his time as mediator Mitchell gave a real sense of optimism for the world, even in its current state of conflict and his words emphasized the importance of the art of listening. He said that, and I paraphrase, all world conflicts were caused by humankind and therefore can be solved by humankind too. But you have to be ready to spend time listening to all the parties and give everybody involved a chance to be listened to if mediation is to be successful.

Listening in a conversation also goes beyond words. A dear psychotherapist friend of mine admits that he rarely listens to the words of his patients, especially during the first part of a session. Instead he understands more from listening to the fragility or strength of the patient's voice, its timbre, pitch, light or shade and the speed of delivery. There are many conversations when it is better to say very little: friends who have exciting news, friends who are grieving, friends who are hurt or angry. They need to be able to be listened to, and I try to remember that. Even if I think my pearls of wisdom are valuable and important, it is far better to remain quiet, actively listen and let them do the talking.

But now it is time to unwrap listening to music. My parcel is smaller and getting close to revealing the innermost best present, but there are still a few sheets of party paper to go. I think there are the same layers in listening to music as there are in listening to words. Much of my music listening occurs on my own, spurring me on, comforting myself with recordings of familiar pieces, or challenging myself with the unknown and unexpected. I try (but very often don't succeed) to truly and actively listen, rather than half listen and half succumb to voices in my head trying to sort out the problems of the day. The former is intentional and satisfying listening while the latter turns music listening into a distraction, a background, a little too close to automatic hearing rather than mind-filling listening.

This brings me to the centre of "pass the parcel," and I am going to cheat with a double present, as for me there are two kinds of higher level musical collaborative listening. I love choral music of all kinds, and sacred choral music in particular: Palestrina, Tallis, Bach, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Verdi, Faure, Britten, Chilcott, the list of champions goes ever on. My father was in the army, so we moved around the world every two or three years all through my childhood. As soon as we arrived in a new town or country, my parents would seek out a local choral society for us all, and I continued to do this after I left home. Wherever I have lived, both as a child and as an adult, I have always sung in a choir. It is a great way to meet people and feel part of a new community quickly while also doing something I love to do. This leads me to the specific art of listening as a singer. As we sing, listening becomes a collaboration again. There is something intensely special about listening to all fellow choir members, tuning and timing together, and making music in collaboration.

Last of all is the exceptional experience of live music performance. It can be a world acclaimed orchestra in the Carnegie Hall or a young violinist standing up in the school gymnasium. The quality of performance may be different, but to me the union of per-

formers and listeners is what makes such events so special. As an amateur pianist, solo piano concerts are especially important to me. I have had the fortune and privilege of being present at concerts in intimate settings, in a house by a loch in Scotland, in a sun-lit barn in southern France, in a living room in rural Kent, where truly gifted pianists have played. Listening to live performances like this feels like a true collaboration of pianist and audience. Sometimes it is me who is the somewhat reluctant performer, and even though I feel like a hedgehog in the middle of a busy road, in those moments when I come up for air, and at the end of my piece as I finish playing, even I feel the audience on my journey with me. In my more comfortable place as a member of the audience I feel a whole language of music and intense discovery passing from the hands of the performer to me. Both of us travel on the emotional journey through the soundscape that the composer has created for us. When the last note is played, in that glorious suspension before real life enters in again, the music and the listening carry on through the silence.

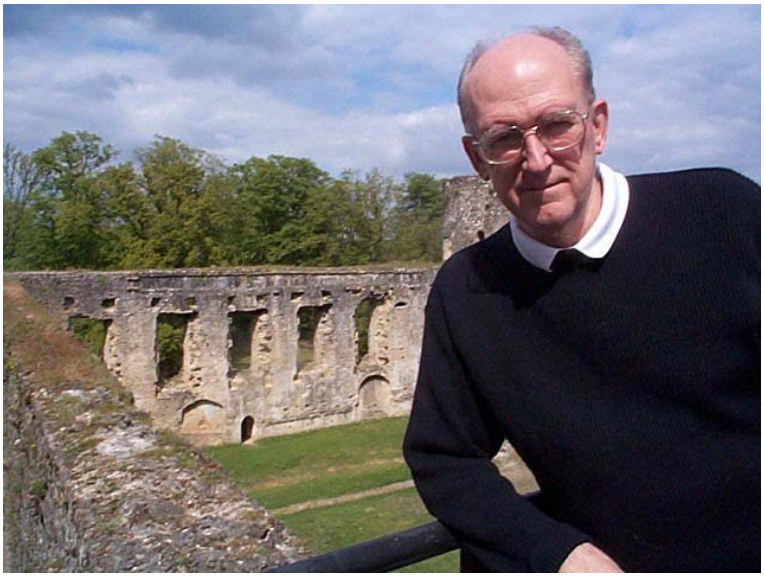
Beyond Sound

By Aloo Denish Obiero

To hear is natural, to listen is an art
To hear is instinctive, to listen is a skill
To hear is automatic, to listen is intentional
To hear is effortless, to listen demands mindfulness
To hear is to sense, to listen is to understand
Hearing happens by chance, listening happens by choice
Hearing is passive, listening is active
Hearing is surface level, listening is profound
Hearing fills the ears, listening fills the mind
Hearing catches sounds, listening catches meaning

Learning to Listen, a Lost Art Recovered

by Michael Johnson



About Michael

Michael was born and raised in a small town in Indiana. From the age of 17 he never stopped traveling. After graduating from San Jose State College he went on to Columbia University, New York, on a fellowship in international reporting. In 1967 The Associated Press hired him and sent him to Moscow for four years as a general news reporter. He then worked as a business and economics writer in Paris, New York and London, finally settling in Bordeaux ten years ago where he became a music journalist, critic and portrait artist. His special interest is piano performance and composition.

On a night flight across the Atlantic recently, I clapped on a new set of Bose Bluetooth headphones. Within minutes, a stewardess squeezed my shoulder and I looked up and saw her mouth flapping—but she made no sound. All I could hear was Rachmaninoff's Concerto No. 3 that was playing through my headphones. It took me a few seconds to regain my composure. No, I didn't need any more coffee, I told her. Back to the music, I was about to experience the true meaning of listening.

If you are properly prepared, just a few minutes of the sharp trebles and thunderous basses of quality headphones creates a private world of pure music. One can hardly

avoid listening to the Arkady Volodos performance of this brilliant concerto. Best of all, on headphones nobody yells at me, "Turn it down for God's sake!"

And yet ironically, the advent of listening through high-tech recordings has in some ways been harmful, not helpful. We have removed much of classical music from the intimacy of live performances and created the sterile experience of playing a CD or downloading tracks from the Internet. Just 60 or 70 years ago it was only the live performance that gave audiences a true connection to the music and the player. Everybody got involved, everybody listened. Now that is largely gone, as concert venues are half-empty and much of the audience is aging retirees, some of them asleep. Waking up and learning to listen may turn out to be the saving grace of the classical tradition. "We kind of caused the problem," admits Andrew Scheps, an American recording engineer, by making it too easy to miss the intimate experience that players, especially solo pianists, want and need.

So much recorded music today ends up in the background but never connects. A comprehensive treatment of regaining that connection is explored in the book *Music: The Art of Listening* by Jean Ferris, a former music history and appreciation professor at Arizona State University. "Listening to classical music is itself an art," she writes, "and good listening is an active, creative experience."

The personal experience is investigated further in a recent documentary of the same name, "The Art of Listening," available free on YouTube. Here's the link: Volodos playing Rachmaninoff.

There are perhaps two kind of pianists, those that just hammer the clavier louder and faster and those like Volodos who listen intently as they brush the keyboard with their fingertips. In this video, Volodos playing Rachmaninoff, Volodos playing Rachmaninoff was all ears and so was I.

Working as a critic, I keep finding more cases of careful attention to listening skills. It is virtually becoming an international movement. Indeed, learning to listen is perhaps the best hope for rescuing classical music from the dustbin of history. Statistics are at an all-time low, ranking pop and rock and hip-hop at the top and classical at four percent and dropping. Could it be true that there is nowhere to go but up? Probably.

Many others in the realm of classical music have joined the movement. Julian Blackmore, a British composer and sound designer, takes a professional interest in absorbing and processing music in the brain. He calls it "active listening" and says it can lead to a far deeper understanding and appreciation of complex classical music. "And as woo-woo as this sounds, it's a unique and priceless kind of satisfaction that money can't buy," he adds.

Listening can provide this profound satisfaction, for example, in compositions by Claude Debussy and other impressionist composers. Debussy's secret was to create color rather than line. Only through "active listening" can this rich artistry be appreciated.

Learning to Listen, a Lost Art Recovered

One of Debussy's pianos is preserved in the Museum Labenche in Brive-la-Gaillard in southern France. Word of its resting place has spread in the European piano world and several Debussy players have managed to get access to play his music on his own piano—no doubt sensing the great composer's ghost in a corner, listening.

These players value the rich tone wafting out of Debussy's hand-made Bluthner piano augmented by the Aliquot "fourth string," installed in the top three octaves, not to be struck with hammers but providing sympathetic resonance. The vibrations shoot across the entire 88 keys, creating a colorful, enriched sound in the full range of octaves. In this video, the tone Debussy intended has been masterfully recreated. The piano is a 1889 Bluthner, with the Aliquot fourth strings in place. Listen to the layers of sound and watch the sensitive pedaling in the player's casual tennis shoes.

Help is easily available. A wide choice of advice, courses and instructional videos from experts flood the internet today. My favorite is a talk about how to take in what you are hearing: "How to Listen to Classical Music: Sonata Form."

The late philosopher Rudolf Steiner wrote that music is the only art form that flows from the spiritual world, not tangible works as in architecture, painting or sculpture. If you step back and listen a great player such as Volodos, Yevgeny Kissin or Glenn Gould, you might agree that music plays to your inner sense of well-being, as Steiner wrote in his essays, compiled and published as *The Inner Nature of Music: The Experience of Tone.*

To take listening to classical music seriously is to find solace, reduce stress in your life and even improve your memory. Personally and for all these reasons, my life is filled with classical music, live and recorded. When you listen to Rachmaninoff in the hands of Volodos you carry it in your head forever.

Chopin, the Nocturnes and Romanticism

by Paul Roberts

About Paul

Pianist, writer, lecturer, inspiring teacher, Paul Roberts has earned the admiration of audiences, critics and fellow professionals worldwide. He has written a biography of Debussy, and seminal books on the piano music of Debussy (*Images*) and Ravel (*Reflections*). Most recently his *Reading Franz Liszt—Revealing the Poetry Behind the Music* was hailed by International Piano Magazine as 'dazzling and richly informed. Paul Roberts could hardly be more persuasive.' 'Perceptive and nobly written,' wrote Alfred Brendel.

Recently appointed Series Editor of a new project for Bloomsbury, *Short Guides to the Piano Repertoire*, Paul Roberts will draw on his rich experience as performer and teacher and write *A Short Guide to Impressionism*, which will be published next year. Of his first book, *Images*, Richard Goode wrote: 'It is a complete picture of Debussy's poetic world, and is one of the few indispensable books on music that I know.'

Paul Roberts is the artistic director of the international piano summer school in Southwest France, Music and Theatre at Chateau d'Aix (https://www.musicauchateau.com/index.php).

Chopin, the Nocturnes and Romanticism

Chopin is the greatest of all, for with the piano alone he discovered everything.' Thus said Debussy, according to his pupil, the pianist Marguerite Long. Leaving aside the hyperbole, today the proposition has more or less universal assent, but it was not always so. Pianists in Chopin's day had enormous charisma—the virtuoso phenomenon was new, fashionable, highly competitive—but this did not mean piano music had the same status as opera or the symphony. Pianists immediately post-Beethoven were largely crowd pleasers, their repertoire was popular dance tunes and marches, or drawn from the current opera repertoire, and the solo piano recital that we are so familiar with today was unheard of. The virtuoso earned a living through benefit concerts, put on by themselves to draw fashionable audiences willing to pay to hear, and see, the latest hero. Composition was secondary (all were composers and improvisers, it was a fact of the profession). Such was Chopin's milieu when in the late 1820s he set out to forge a career as a pianist. The salon concert was more often than not given by a motley collection of instrumentalists and singers, while operatic transcriptions, dances and marches were compulsory. It beggars belief today that Chopin's music would be performed in vocal arrangements, to which it seems he did not protest: as late as May 1848 his letters record Pauline Viardot singing his mazurkas at Covent Garden in London, and again in July we learn that 'Mrs Viardot sang me my mazurkas . . . It was very beautiful.'

We know of course from innumerable accounts the effect of Chopin's compelling genius as a pianist, wherever he was heard. He brought to the salon miracles of poetry. There were, however, a few dissenters. London, so often an outlier, published vituperative critiques, calling him 'an artistical nonentity' in a review of his mazurkas as late as 1841 when almost everyone else was saluting his genius. 'It is all very well for a feverish enthusiast, like M. Liszt, to talk poetical nothings about his works,' opined the reviewer, before going on to damn Chopin by association with 'that arch-enchantress George Sand.' (Britain has always been uneasy about French morals.) Nearly two years later this position was grudgingly modified: though 'over-rated by the enthusiasts of the romantic school, with Dr. Liszt and Dr. Schumann at their head,' (again the British mistrust of most things Continental), Chopin was allowed to be 'eminently an original thinker and blessed with an inexhaustible invention.' So why, then, 'over-rated'? The justification for such a view has the authentic ring of patronising certainty: Chopin, granted status as a pianist, as a composer was 'incapable of producing a symphony or overture.' The reviewer might have added he was incapable of opera too, the genre that even more than the symphony was considered the ultimate glory of music. Perhaps he was incapable, but increasingly it came to be realised it didn't matter, that 'with the piano alone he discovered everything.' But perhaps it was through opera that, ironically, he made his discoveries. This can certainly be argued in the case of his nocturnes.

It was not only Chopin's love for Italian opera that lay behind the style of composition now forever associated with him: the *bel canto* manner had Viennese and English

antecedents, among them Mozart and Hummel in the one case, and Clementi and Field in the other. So the wonderful outpouring of melody in Chopin's two concertos can be seen as a natural part of the conventional stile brillante of his early years, which soon led to the inimitable nocturne style that became a hallmark of his piano writing. And neither did Chopin invent the nocturne as a genre. The Irishman John Field, whose nocturnes we are told the young Pole took particular pleasure in playing, is usually regarded as his predecessor, but there were other composers too. It is incontestable, however, that Chopin imbued the nocturne with an expressive strength that allows us finally to see it, in his hands, as a wholly new creation.

He saw his path from the beginning, despite the need at first, as a young pianist making his way, to conform with the conventions of the prevailing *stile brillante*. His teacher, Elsner, to whom he owed so much, was constantly urging him towards vocal music, and above all opera. This was perhaps the only advice from this revered figure that the student did not heed. (Chopin wrote songs, but mostly these were inscribed in albums to his friends.) But even Elsner came to see the momentousness of what his student created instead: a 'highly dynamic interplay between the vocal and instrumental, the singing and the pianistic. He was a master of the piano who made the keys sing—in Italian'—as today's leading Chopin biographer, Mieczysław Tomaszewski, has written. As early as 1831 the E flat Nocturne op.9 no.2 is a perfect example of *bel canto* adapted to the keyboard. Chopin was 20 years old.

One of Proust's characters in *Remembrance of Things Past* captures unerringly the effect on the listener of Chopin's bel canto: 'long sinuous phrases . . . exploring far beyond the point which one might have expected their notes to reach and which divert themselves in those fantastic bypaths only to return more deliberately—with a more premeditated reprise, with more precision, as on a crystal bowl that reverberates to the point of exquisite agony—to clutch at one's heart.' Again and again in the memoirs of those who heard Chopin play his own music we find similar attempts to capture the essence of his unique expressivity. The music and the performance of it are conflated to such an extent that it is often impossible to separate which is being referred to. Heinrich Heine was not alone in calling Chopin 'not only a virtuoso, but a poet,' or in believing that his music was for those 'who hear not only with their ears but with their own souls.' But Proust's rhapsodic account, three-quarters of a century after Heine, has a further significance in that it captures for us—in 'one long sinuous phrase' reflecting Chopin's—a fundamental, though often overlooked, aspect of the reception of Chopin's music in the 1830s. Proust creates in his prose the complex motions of the mind when listening to music, the to and fro of thoughts and feelings as the music plays upon the deepest recesses of our being, utterly private to ourselves as we listen, the point inducing tears, or perhaps more to the point, diagnosed by Wordsworth, where 'Thoughts do often lie too deep for tears.'

It is a musical characteristic not exclusive to Chopin, but it places his art, in this single respect, unequivocally as part of Romanticism, as belonging to the Romantic era's

exploration of what was freely and repeatedly referred to as the 'soul,' and which was the accepted province of literature, above all poetry. But for George Sand, Chopin expressed 'more than the literature of the entire century;' a Polish reviewer in 1836 proclaimed him as 'the Shakespeare, Byron and Mickiewicz of music;' Heine went further, placing him among the greatest proponents of all art, whether in music painting or literature: 'we recognise that he comes from the land of Mozart, Rafael and Goethe—his true native land is the dream-realm of poetry.'

With Beethoven as the touchstone, composers of the 19th century created a musical language, without the need for words, that had all the reach of language itself, of poetry—pastoral, lyrical, epic, tragic—and the new genre of the realist novel. Audiences came to expect an experience listening to music that was the equivalent of their reading Byron and Balzac, the best-sellers of the age, art that ran the whole gamut of feeling from the tragic to the erotic, from the refinements of sensibility to the extremes of heroic passion. This was Chopin's art too, in the concentrated world of the nocturnes (where time seems to stand still) as much as in the larger scale ballades, sonatas and scherzi. It was how his first listeners experienced his music, and how we still experience it. And the language we use, Tomaszewski points out, so often resorts to contradictory images to describe it (Liszt's 'bitter happiness,' Heine's 'dolorous rapture'). 'Chopin was able to express a profound sense of—and at the same time a revolt against—the solitude of man and the paradoxicality of history. We hear the voice of a lyricism freed from sentimentality, coloured with a purifying tinge of tragedy and sublimity.'

This was not the view of all his contemporaries. Mendelssohn admired him enormously—'we learn from one another,' he said—but he recognised they were artistically poles apart. Comparing him to Paganini he suggested Chopin suffered from a similar 'Parisian mania for despair and sentimental affectation.' Another way of saying this is that Chopin was inescapably part of French Romanticism. Yet outwardly he wanted little to do with it. In many respects he was an ardent classicist, an admirer of Beethoven and Bach, a believer in the autonomy of instrumental music. Liszt was too, but the addition of texts, descriptive titles, all the literary parallels that dominated contemporary discourse (Liszt's world), from all this he remained apart. Berlioz recounted an afternoon with friends—'musical and poetical celebrities,' among whom were Liszt and Chopin—in which they discussed 'art, poetry, thought, music and drama.' But we can easily imagine how Berlioz would have dominated the proceedings, and we might ask quite how much Chopin took part; for Liszt recalled that Chopin, 'although so closely associated with many of the most outstanding personalities of the contemporary literary and musical scene that he appeared to be at one with them, nevertheless always remained a stranger amidst them all.'

Chopin's fastidious artistic temperament was at odds with the vision and practice of the cosmopolitan and hydra-headed Liszt (although he did say he'd like 'to rob' Liszt of his way of performing his etudes). For Liszt, who embraced the Romantic ethos in everything, of course Chopin would have seemed an outsider. But the truth is surely

slightly different. Chopin was an integral part of George Sand's radical circle of writers and artists for nearly 10 years; she herself was one of the most admired writers of the age; over the same period the greatest of Romantic painters, Eugene Delacroix, was one of the composer's closest confidants. Though Chopin was detached, inescapably he would have been an observer. He could hardly have failed to measure himself, proudly no doubt (and with a certain aloofness), against the radical ideas of George Sand's high-powered artistic friends. And from the recollections of Chopin's pupils we know that he actually believed passionately in the analogy between music and language; and he avidly read the poetry of the foremost poet of Polish Romanticism, Adam Mickiewicz (perhaps Poland's Byron, and who possibly, according to Schumann, inspired the ballades). Many pupils recalled Chopin's insistence that the piano must 'speak' and that the piano must 'sing,' and for exactly the same purpose as language, 'to express thoughts, feelings and passions.' So the picture of Chopin as a 'stranger' among the passionate literati of Sand's circle is more nuanced than Liszt would have us believe. He might have been largely silent (he would perhaps go away and improvise at the keyboard), but he would certainly have been listening.

Today Chopin's art, exemplified by the sublime example of his nocturnes, is needed more than ever. They speak (and sing) now as strongly as they did nearly 200 years ago, and for the same reasons. In 1837 one of his friends in Paris (the Marquis de Custine) wrote a heartfelt letter to him in a style out of fashion today, but which sums up the nature and meaning of Chopin for all of us: 'You have reached the heights of suffering and poetry; the melancholy of your works penetrates deep into the heart; with you the listener is alone, even amidst a crowd; it is no longer the piano, it is the soul, and what a soul! . . . Only Art as you, Sir, feel it is capable of bringing together people divided by the practical side of life; people love and understand one another through Chopin.'

'Alone, even amidst a crowd'—crucially the experience takes place within our own heads, silently, secretly, exactly in the way we read a novel. It is this above all that places Chopin at the centre of European Romanticism. It is why the nocturnes endure and why we always return to them.

What I Hear When I Listen to Carnatic Music

by Sriram Khe

About Sriram

After earning his PhD in Urban and Regional Planning from the University of Southern California, Sriram worked in California for nine years before moving north. Oregon has been his home since then. He blogs practically every day on all things that interest him at ksriram.substack.com, and can be contacted at AmDrKhe@gmail.com.

In the traditional, conservative, environment in which I was raised in peninsular southern India, in the state of Tamil Nadu, my parents were ardent fans of South Indian Carnatic classical music. In the early years, when our family did not own a turntable or a cassette player, it helped that the government-owned All India Radio network's radio stations played a lot of classical music. In addition to such an immersion, I was an auditing student hanging around when my older sister began her Carnatic music voice lessons. I easily took to Carnatic music at a young age.

The compositions in Carnatic music channeled Hinduism through the lyrics, which are typically in Telugu, Sanskrit, and Kannada, with a few in Tamil—the language that we spoke at home. Even when the lyrics were not in Tamil, the overall theme was clear: It was all about "bhakti," which is devotion and love, often on a personal level, for Hindu gods. For all purposes, this classical music is devotional music.

A composition by Thyagaraja, whose works from two centuries ago dominate Carnatic music, clearly lays out the relationship between Carnatic music and bhakti:

Sangeetha gnanamu bhakti vinaa, San margamu kaladhe

(The knowledge of music, without devotion—bhakti—is not the right path.)

The lyrics of this composition make clear that Carnatic music is a mode of worship.

As happens with many teenagers, I began to question my faith. I raised questions about Hinduism, and started reading up about the religion, which quickly expanded into reading up on the world's other religions. With this new awareness, I faced a dilemma

when I listened to Carnatic music: There was the melodic music and the improvisations by musicians that I thoroughly enjoyed, versus the religiosity from which I was rapidly moving away. I began to listen to Carnatic music but without bhakti and not wanting to hear the religion either. What is Carnatic music without faith?

These dynamics were playing out in the world of music too with the Carnatic musician K. J. Yesudas. A Christian by birth, Yesudas is an established musician who learnt Carnatic music from one of the greats. Given that Carnatic music is about Hinduism and bhakti, it did not surprise me to learn that Yesudas was threatened with excommunication from the Catholic church. The logic was that by singing Carnatic music compositions and other Hindu prayer songs—especially in temples—Yesudas had strayed far from the monotheism of Christianity. The excommunication never happened and, ironically, because of his Christian background, Yesudas, like other non-Hindus, was denied entry into the inner sanctum of Hindu temples.

There was a parallel development that also interfered with my listening to Carnatic music. This involved the caste system, which has stratified India's Hindus for centuries. Hindus are categorized into four hierarchical castes: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, with Brahmins at the top. Outside of this caste system are a significant number who are casteless, with the tribal population being a separate category. A Brahmin by birth, I started questioning the caste system as I became intellectually and socially aware of it in my teenage years.

It did not take long to notice that an overwhelming percentage of musicians in, and fans of, Carnatic music were Brahmins. The great composers, especially the "trinity" of Thyagaraja, Syama Sastri,and Muthuswami Dikshitar, were all Brahmins. The teenage me did not view these as mere coincidences that could be overlooked.

Now, not only was I hearing religion when I listened to Carnatic music but I was also hearing caste in music. Cumulatively, religion and caste made it a challenge for me to listen to Carnatic music, and to champion it with my friends, not all of whom were Brahmins and who did not listen to Carnatic music. How was it possible for my friends who were not Brahmins to not be familiar with Carnatic music? Did people who were not Brahmins hear the oppressive caste system in Carnatic music? Brahmins treasured Carnatic music as their heritage, but did they hear their caste while listening to it?

Moving to the United States for graduate studies and making my life here created a physical divide between me and practices in the old country. Without daily exposure to Hinduism, the caste system, and Carnatic music, I did not have to wrestle with those old questions either.

About a decade ago, when I was visiting with my people in India, I attended a Carnatic music performance by the daughter of a cousin of my father's. Women in the

extended family in generations past were denied formal training in music despite their interests because of the practice of child marriage that was the norm through my grandmother's time. They would have been proud of this young woman's accomplishment, especially given the fact that she was born and raised in the United States. As for me, this was the first Carnatic music concert that I had attended in more than thirty years. I had enough and more within me to appreciate the music and to engage in related conversations, but could not shake the underlying discomfort with religion and caste.

Even a casual external observer might wonder whether it is possible to develop a body of secular Carnatic music that is able to bypass Hinduism and its caste system.

A few musicians have indeed tried. One of the most prominent voices leading the effort to reform Carnatic music is T. M. Krishna, a much loved and lauded musician until his social activism rubbed against the conservative grain. He has systematically included contemporary poems that are about Christian or Islamic faiths, and sings them in a traditional Carnatic music structure.

Krishna, a Brahmin by birth, persists in his efforts to include non-Hindus and non-Brahmins, while others who have tried to initiate changes have succumbed to the pressure from the audience who resist change. Some of the harshest criticisms come from Indians who live abroad in the United States or countries in the Middle East. It is no surprise that the critics are Hindu and, almost always, Brahmin. This debate overlaps with the election of a Hindu nationalistic party that has been in control of the country's federal government since 2014, and to some extent, the fight within Carnatic music is also a proxy political fight.

Perhaps the best evidence of this continuing fierce resistance to reform came recently when the prestigious Chennai-based Music Academy decided to bestow upon T.M. Krishna the title of "Sangita Kalanidhi," which is considered the highest honor in Carnatic music. In response to his selection, many leading musicians voiced their disapproval, and some withdrew from the Music Academy's annual conference and concert series. A few even returned their own "Sangita Kalanidhi" awards in protest.

In the old days, when I was young and devoted to Carnatic music, there was nothing said about the music excluding an overwhelming percentage of Hindus who were not Brahmins, and it was generally accepted that the music is about the Hindu faith. Nobody, therefore, heard the dissonance within. Now, these issues are openly talked about, which is promising.

All these do not mean that I have stopped listening to those melodious musical notes. A few years ago, my sister overheard me playing a few old film songs that I had pulled up on YouTube. Growing up in India, I, like most kids, listened to a lot of film songs. Like most tweens and teenagers, I too felt the emotional strings the film songs pulled. Emotions of love and angst and anger and more, overlaid with philosophical takes on life.

What I Hear When I Listen to Carnatic Music

Often, it was the melody more than the lyrics that drew me in. This was particularly the case when I listened to Hindi film music. While films from India are often referred to as Bollywood, a portmanteau that combines Bombay and Hollywood, the movies from Bollywood are in the Hindi language. I grew up in the southern part of India, far away from Bombay, where Tamil is the regional language. I knew only a few words in Hindi and, therefore, it was the melodies that pulled the emotional strings of love and angst and anger and more.

My sister commented that I favored oldies that were firmly rooted in classical music. Indeed, most of my favorites are film songs in which one can detect the underlying Indian classical music ragas. And the singers and composers of the wonderful film songs I listen to even now were not all Brahmins. As a matter of fact, one of my favorite singers is Yesudas, whom I mentioned above. He is one of the rare musicians who sang film songs and Carnatic music compositions. In the world of Hindi film songs, Mohammed Rafi is a favorite; as the name clearly suggests, he was Muslim. Rafi and Yesudas are examples of a film industry that was, and continues to be, inclusive, in contrast to the exclusive Carnatic music arena. The actors and directors come from diverse backgrounds, and music composers and singers too reflect the country's diversity.

Classical music purists consider film songs to be "light music," and rightfully so. For instance, a musician might perform a raga's nuances over twenty minutes, whereas film songs based on that same raga would be tightly structured within the typical length of three or four minutes. Film songs avoid the intricate rhythms, rigorous techniques, and improvisations that are explored and performed live in classical music. But, this lighter version of classical music certainly does pull my emotional strings in my seventh decade of life as much as, and sometimes even more than, how they appealed to me when I was a teenager. Even the "light" version of classical music has charms to soothe a savage breast.

Note

North Indian classical music, also known as Hindustani music, is similar to Carnatic music with a structure of ragas and the taal—the rhythm. However, lyrical compositions do not define Hindustani music and there is practically no role for bhakti. The lyrics in Hindustani music could even be secularly romantic, in contrast to the explicitly religious tone in Carnatic music. Finally, over the centuries, Muslim musicians have played significant roles in the development of Hindustani music unlike in Carnatic music, and this continues even today.

TACET: A Memoir in Sounds

by Jeremy Hatch

About Jeremy

Jeremy is a composer, electronic music producer, writer, and private music teacher based in Portland, Oregon, where he settled with his wife Jessica in 2018 after decades on the move. He studied piano from early childhood with a series of private teachers and as a music major at Cabrillo College in Aptos, California. Initially he contemplated a career as a performer, but his parallel love of literature and writing led him to instead pursue a career as a writer and editor, which eventually landed him a role as a bit player in the San Francisco literary scene for seven years. Finding that life ultimately unfulfilling, he returned to music, and since 2011, he has built a rich and varied creative career on the foundation of studio teaching. He currently serves on the board of the Oregon Music Teachers Association as Publications chair, writes essays and blogs on Substack, composes piano and orchestral music, and produces electronic music as Baby Tiger.

Movement III: TACET

> *What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out.*
>
> —John Cage, writing in 1952 on the premiere earlier that year of 4'33" (Gann, p. 4)

2025: SE Portland, Oregon

At home now, what I hear is mostly silence. Even though there is no such thing, as John Cage observed. So let's say instead: it is quiet enough at home that, most of the time, I can perceive the subtle hiss of my own incipient tinnitus. After nearly four decades of precarious and noisy city living, I have settled into the quietest place I have ever lived. Unless I'm playing or writing music, or we're having a party, the only sounds are occasional and mostly come from outside: a passing truck, distant sirens, a nearby conversation floating through my studio window. The trash pickup is the loudest moment in the week.

TACET: A Memoir in Sounds

I spend most of my time in my basement studio, so the household sounds take place above my head throughout the day and night. Through the HVAC ducts I hear my wife Jessica on the phone in her office in the attic. When she descends to the kitchen for another cup of coffee I hear her footsteps on the stairs, and the skittering cats chasing each other around twice a day, between their long naps. When the mailman comes up on our wooden porch, there are two or three big clomps and a clatter of metal as he shoves my mail through the slot.

John Cage once said that he regarded his silent piece, 4'33"—in which the listener is invited to regard accidental ambient sounds as music—as being less of a performance piece than an act of framing that is available to anybody at any time in any place, like stopping to make art of whatever is in front of you by taking a photo of it. "I don't sit down to do it," he said, thirty years after its premiere. "I turn my attention toward it. I realize that it's going on continuously." (Gann, p. 186)

> *The piece is not actually silent (there will never be silence until death comes which never comes); it is full of sound, but sounds which I did not think of beforehand, which I hear for the first time the same time others hear. What we hear is determined by our own emptiness, our own receptivity; we receive to the extent we are empty to do so.*
>
> —John Cage writing in 1954 about 4'33" in a private letter (Gann, p. 191)

2020: Cedar Mill, Oregon

During that first pandemic summer, we would hear children playing on the grass between the apartments, yelling, chasing each other, making up the rules as they went. I knew they could hear me practicing my Schubert every day after lunch, just as we could all hear my neighbor's TV tuned to a crime show, turned up loud enough that we knew the names of the characters. I thought, *this is how things used to be when I was a kid*, making friends in the building or on the street, simply because they were in the building or on the street. Relationships and practices that came to define my life started largely because this kid G. lived next door who was a computer geek, and S. next door to *him* wanted to start a band, and that's pretty much why I make computer music in my forties.

The pandemic was said to be isolating us, but I found it was making the immediate boundaries of our lives more porous. I heard what my neighbors were up to, and got to know them better, and their kids started hanging out with each other—one of the few upsides to an awful summer. We felt some solidarity then. But when the world started opening up for good, we immediately resumed our previous isolated lives. When our downstairs neighbors moved to Tennessee, they didn't bother to tell us. The children had long since stopped playing together in the green.

TACET: A Memoir in Sounds

> *Half-intellectually and half-sentimentally, when the war came along, I decided to use only quiet sounds. There seemed to be no truth, no good, in anything big in society. But quiet sounds were like loneliness, or love or friendship. Permanent, I thought, values, independent at least from* Life, Time *and Coca-Cola.*
>
> —John Cage, from the "Lecture on Nothing" (Cage, p. 188)

2016: Oakland, California

We had moved in together with high hopes for our new apartment, a new life in a new and exciting place. Pleasant at first, by the time we moved away our neighborhood had been completely taken over by drug dealers and homeless encampments. We left the apartment only to walk directly to the car with our keys held in a fist. We didn't hear gunshots every day, but often enough to plan our exit. Much of what I heard there, sitting on my couch by the street-side window with the blinds drawn, was bass music at a blasting volume and conversations that I wished I hadn't heard. I stopped using the couch at all during the day for fear of stray gunfire.

Yet. Despite all this chaos and darkness, normal life found a way. The kids who lived in the adjacent building played together in the gated alleyway where it was relatively safe, shouting and laughing and kicking a ball against the walls of the buildings, a repetitious thudding that we tolerated as long as we could. The neighbors scratched together a little spare cash by harvesting deposit cans, which they would sell for a penny each to a homeless lady who would take them to the recycling center for a 4-cent profit. She'd stand at the gate honking a little horn so she didn't have to shout, and a clatter of cans would ensue amid negotiations.

Movement II: TACET

> *The commonest and cheapest sounds, as the barking of a dog, produce the same effect on fresh and healthy ears that the rarest music does . . . It is better that these cheap sounds be music to us than that we have the rarest ears for music in any other sense.*
>
> —Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, December 27, 1857 (Thoreau, 1906, p. 227)

2010: San Francisco III. Mission District

My first morning in that second-floor flat, freshly separated and soon to be divorced from T., I was awakened by a spectacular performance of accidental noise music. Across the street was a building housing a sub-agency of an agency, and this building featured a giant two-bay garage. Every morning at six thirty precisely these doors would begin a long, slow climb. It sounded as though their tracks had not been greased within my lifetime. They produced a weird wailing chorus of metallic whistles, squeals, squeaks, and shrieks,

accompanied by the rattling of hinged corrugated metal. Before the door was quite all the way up, the operators began backing their vehicles out of the garage and down the street, so that the revving of engines and the beep-beep-beep reverse-drive warning sounded, along with shouting in Cantonese. The garage doors stopped their squalling for a moment before someone hit another button and the doors started their long, slow descent and the operators drove away. The doors would reach the ground ten minutes after the whole ballet started, and all would be peaceful once again.

My initial proximity to the music of these doors each weekday morning coincided with the publication of Kyle Gann's fine book on 4'33", which prompted me to think more seriously about the ideas embodied by the piece than I ever had before. Up until then I had thought of it as merely a high-minded prank, a Zen koan that sought to reveal the impossibility of silence by calling the impossibility itself "music". I had not really connected Cage and his experiments, that piece in particular, with the ambient music I loved and my adventures in noise music a decade earlier.

But it was undeniable that this grinding and squealing of the doors, combined with the truck sounds and all the shouting in a language I recognized but did not understand, was one of the most fascinating, and even beautiful, things I'd ever heard. It had many of the characteristics of a composed piece of chance music. Above all, it had a routine choreography which gave it a form. But within that form, the specific sounds and rhythms were completely unpredictable, which made for a fascinating listen each time around, like an improvised, accidental performance for an audience of one.

> *There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.*
>
> —John Cage in his 1952 essay "Experimental Music" (Gann, p. 162)

2009: San Francisco, II. Glen Park

The roaring rush of the BART trains as I stood on the platform, the whirr and the wind as a train came barreling in, the driver frantically honking. Less a sound than a full-body experience. I had started working with various literary publishers in the Mission and sometimes took a train in for meetings. But between the new temptations of social media on my computer and my increasingly strained marriage to T., I often had a hard time staying focused on the necessary reading at home. So when I learned that if you entered and exited at the same station, you'd only pay a few dollars even if you rode the trains all day, I started taking my reading projects on board. I'd ride all the way north to Richmond and all the way south to Millbrae, then if I wasn't done with my work by the time I got back to Glen Park, I'd ride on to a transfer point and ride through the Transbay Tube to the East Bay. It made for two or three hours of largely uninterrupted reading time, in a very loud silence

enforced by the sheer din of the train: the blasting of white noise through the tunnels, the clacking of wheels on the tracks, the electric bell that accompanied the opening and closing of the doors, the intercom announcements I didn't need to pay any attention to and which in my memory register as a kind of Charlie Brown talking trombone.

> *Deep Listening is a form of meditation. Attention is directed to the interplay of sounds and silences or the sound/silence continuum. Sound is not limited to musical or speaking sounds, but is inclusive of all perceptible vibrations (sonic formations). The relationship of all perceptible sounds is important.*
>
> —Pauline Oliveros (Oliveros, p. xxiv)

2007: San Francisco, I. Mount Sutro

T. and I had moved to San Francisco with some excitement, she to pursue her academic career and I to pursue a career in writing and publishing. That first house we rented was on the foggy western slope of Mt. Sutro, the central peak in town, atop which sits the giant broadcasting structure known as Sutro Tower. At night, when all other sound had subsided apart from the passing buses every hour, we would hear a persistent low hum that seemed to grow louder the longer you listened to it. We thought we were hearing the tower itself, vibrating with electricity and radio waves.

> *We hear the sound of wood chopping at the farmers' doors, far over the frozen earth, the baying of the house dog, and the distant clarion of the cock . . . The ground is sonorous, like seasoned wood, and even the ordinary rural sounds are melodious . . .*
>
> —Henry David Thoreau in his 1843 essay "A Winter Walk" (Thoreau, 2015, pp. 53–54)

2005: Santa Cruz: II. Pleasure Point

Behind our mobile home there was a large concrete culvert filled with soil and plants, and one year the frogs massively overbred, such that we heard a gigantic chorus of them ribbiting in the darkness of night, ribbiting in the foggy mornings, ribbiting throughout the afternoon and into the twilight. Predators were drawn to the bonanza, and they hunted the frogs almost completely down; the next year it was rare to hear a frog and instead, the crickets dominated.

> *Noise is other people's music: my neighbors' collection blasting at full volume through the open balcony doors on a hot and sticky summer night. My space starts to shrink as the enjoyment of my own environment vanishes . . . If you like your neighbors their music is less noisy.*
>
> —Salomé Vogelin (Vogelin, p. 44)

TACET: A Memoir in Sounds

2002: Scotts Valley, California: II. The Duplex

We lived in the back bedroom of a duplex shared with her mother in the front; the neighbor in the adjacent unit was an elderly woman at the end of her life. She'd listen to opera on full volume and pray out loud, somehow audible over the full force of Traviata. We would sometimes stand on our back porches talking opera, since one of my favorites at the time was Callas' recording of Carmen.

In the several days just before she passed, she sat in the grass in her backyard pulling up thickly-rooted dandelions and enjoying the sun, in the company of her dog—who would become our dog the following week.

2000: Denver, Colorado

We had a front bedroom in the shared house, our window right next to the neighbor's driveway. His ancient brown Econoline was so rusty that in places you could look straight through the van to the house on the other side. He needed to run the engine every day for ten minutes to keep it working, and due to his work this errand came at six thirty in the morning. My work kept me out until two, so I was jolted out of sleep every day by the deep growling blast of the engine, the rattle of decayed metal, the smell of gasoline.

> "We cannot doubt that animals both love and practice music. That is evident. But it seems their musical system differs from ours. It is another school . . . We are not familiar with their didactic works. Perhaps they don't have any."
>
> —Erik Satie, quoted by Cage in his essay on the composer (Cage, p. 146)

1999: Oaxaca, Mexico

The sky is deep red along the line of mountains to the east in the minutes before dawn, then in the moments before, it diffuses into a yellow orange. The deep red infiltrates the black sky, and magenta dominates. A burnished orange soon covers a quarter of the sky, with magenta to the west. The birds begin chirping at this light, and the crickets fade out. Outside the walls of the park an early-morning city bus grinds down on its brakes. High spiked chirps like chickadees start in.

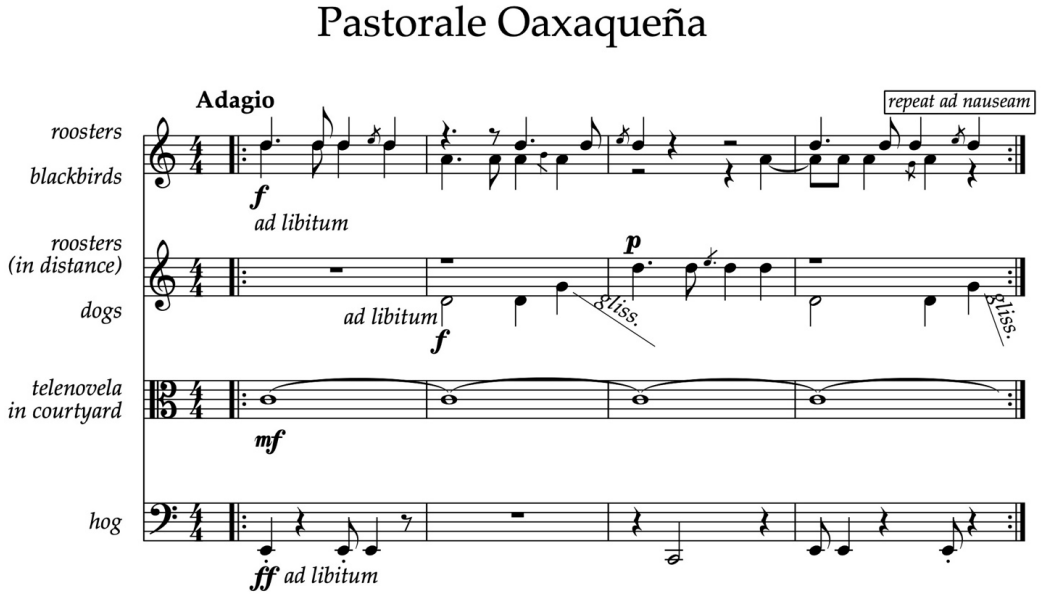
Soon the sky has become purplish-red, and the smaller birds sing in criss-crossing melodies. I can now make out individual flowers on the bougainvillea. The details on the eastern mountains become clearer in the growing light. The crickets are silent now. Or if they still sing, they are drowned out by the quartet of birds that serenade me from the trees. The cowbells of a garbage truck make their rackety clangor three or four blocks away. I can just make out the custodian of the property shouting "¡basura, basura!"

Before long, the loudest thing is the television in the patio downstairs, on which the matriarch of the household is watching a very loud telenovela. It appears we are the

hotel's only guests. We were kept awake by a chorus of roosters, blackbirds, dogs and a hog which serenaded us with the following piece of music:

Silence is not the absence of sound but the beginning of listening.

—Salomé Vogelin (Vogelin, p. 83)



1997: Santa Cruz: I. Felix Street

Instead of going to college right away we got jobs, got married, moved in together, and saved up to spend a year in Mexico. Our apartment complex was at the end of a cul-de-sac that terminated at Neary Lagoon, a bit of wetland that brought us the sounds of seagulls, ducks, coots, crickets, and frogs around the clock.

The complex was populated by college students and retirees: one apartment across the lawn was home to an elderly couple who bickered loudly all the time, and our downstairs neighbor was a young woman who had a habit of smoking and playing her bass late at night. There was a group of Brazilian exchange students whose daily lives seemingly consisted only of two pleasant activities in alternation: playing soccer out on the common green, and playing guitar and singing in the apartment. I had the sense that if I just wandered down and said hello, we'd be instant friends. Alas—I was too shy at the time.

We noticed mourning doves haunting the complex, so we began putting out birdseed for them, and would wake every morning to their coo-coo-coo-cooing, which resembled the quiet purring of a cat. After a time, the birds did attract a stray cat, which, in a temporary alliance, we let sleep inside with us on cold nights.

TACET: A Memoir in Sounds

Movement. I: TACET

It was raining hard outside, and I could hardly hear the music above the rain – just the loudest notes, like little crystals, sonic icebergs rising out of the storm. I couldn't get up and change it, so I just lay there . . . and gradually I was seduced by this listening experience.

—Brian Eno (Eno, p. 216)

1992: Scotts Valley, California: I. Sawyer Circle

Our house was a split-level, built into a hillside in a thin strip of redwood forest that was bounded on its eastern side by Highway 17—an extremely dangerous two-lane mountain highway that was the sole practical commuter route from Santa Cruz to San Jose. Our bedrooms were on the bottom half-floor, mine between my brother's and my parents'. When I looked out the window of my bedroom, I could see the glinting of cars rushing past on the other side of the screen of trees. It made a continuous hissing and whooshing sound, not unlike the sound of the ebbing and flowing ocean.

I remember as a child loving all the sounds, even the unprepared ones. I liked them especially when there was one at a time.

—John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing" (Cage, pp. 185–186)

1983: Fremont, California

Before she passed away, my mother told me that my fascination with producing and listening to sounds was very pronounced very early in life, to the point where she wondered if I was "all right." I'd sit in the kitchen, hitting different pans and dishes with various implements, and listening attentively to the sounds wood and metal produces, when struck with wood, or metal. I liked to move wooden chairs around with my head pressed against the slats, simply to hear and feel the resonance as the feet rubbed on the linoleum. I can't doubt any of this. I'd be seduced by the same activities even today.

Cage, Silence, and Sound

John Cage's 4'33" is one of the most misunderstood pieces of music ever written and yet, at times, one of the avant-garde's best understood as well.

—Kyle Gann (Gann, p. 10)

He told the story many times, in many places. For years preceding the conception of 4'33", Cage had been in search of absolute silence. He wanted to know what silence *really sounds like*. So he looked for a place where no sound was possible. At Harvard he found such a place: an acoustic lab with a room known as an "anechoic chamber". This is an externally soundproofed room, built such that all sounds made inside are fully absorbed by the walls, floor and ceiling. He found though that he still heard a high sound and a low

sound, and when he mentioned this to the engineer, he was told that he was hearing the baseline sounds of human existence: our blood circulating and our nervous system.

In fact, both things were probably just tinnitus, and the description sounds very similar to my own at mid-life. But this answer had a galvanizing poetic resonance for Cage. It prompted his insight that we always hear *something*, even if our own brains and hearts are the only source. He became determined to find a way to make music out of the non-silence that is silence.

His eventual idea was to ask a concert audience to regard four minutes and thirty-three seconds of ambient sound in the concert hall as something to be attended to as carefully as if it were any piece of composed music, a mind-set aided by its appearance in the midst of a program of experimental music, and an overt *performance of the act of performing*: the final score defines three movements, each one containing the sole direction *TACET* (i.e., remain silent), which the original performer marked by opening and closing the fall board of the piano.

It seemed to many at the time and since as little more than an irritating prank, but the ideas behind this small experiment in 1952 came to permanently change our musical culture. Brian Eno's conception of ambient music drew upon the work of Erik Satie and John Cage; the musical-meditative practice of Deep Listening created by Pauline Oliveros is a direct development of Cage's ideas; and various forms of electronic music, from noise music to dance music and hip hop are not easy to imagine without the insight that accidental, "non-musical" and ambient sounds could have aesthetic and musical value.[1]

Although the initial version of the piece was a formal exercise in performance art, he ended up conceiving of it in a way that would almost be a mindfulness meditation exercise, were it not for the emphasis on the aesthetic. And this "continuous" form of the piece is, by definition, always available for enjoyment.

And what remains somewhat radical for a concert audience is not so radical to ask of oneself in everyday life. Cage often made the point that we instinctively regard the visual field as pregnant with aesthetic interest, whether it be clouds in the sky or the patterns created by mold and fungus.[2] With that comparison, he'd suggest taking a moment to attend to the sounds in your everyday life in the same way. Listen, for example, to the way that distant helicopter blends with the cars passing by on the street, or to the mixture of conversation and clinking dishes and blasts of steam from the espresso machine in the cafe, or to the wind rushing through those dogwood branches across the street. Sounds like these are always present, and when you attend to them carefully, you will hear the beauty in their interplay. They might even move you, if you listen long enough.[3] But don't take my word for it. Just listen. You'll hear it for yourself.

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[1]Today, a typical student exercise in electronic music production consists of recording some kitchen sounds and making playable instruments from those samples.

[2]Cage's principal hobby was hunting for wild mushrooms.

[3]To paraphrase a Zen instruction, if you find it boring for two minutes, try it for four. Or perhaps: four and a half.

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Listening:
A Path to Divine Recognition

by Dr. Charmaine Leclair

About Charmaine

Dr. Charmaine is a cellist in the Newport Symphony Orchestra on the Oregon coast. She earned her Bachelor and Master degrees in Cello Performance, then completed her PhD in Music History from the University of Oregon. Her dissertation covered the chamber music of the 20th century Mexican composer, Silvestre Revueltas. She was a cellist and orchestra librarian for the Eugene Symphony, Eugene Opera and the Oregon Mozart Players for fourteen years while maintaining a cello teaching studio of 25 students. She then moved to Charleston, South Carolina for twenty years, where she worked as an orchestral librarian and was a cellist in the Charleston Symphony, Hilton Head Symphony and other orchestras. When not performing, Leclair can be found obsessively maintaining hiking trails along the coast with a hard hat on and a hand saw in tow. She lives with her mother, a former mayor and current city councilor of the city of Newport, and their dog, Felix.

The harp gives forth murmurous
music; and the dance goes on
without hands and feet.
It is played without fingers, it is heard
without ears: for He is the ear;
And He is the listener:

—Kabir

Listening

I admit that I cannot recall a single piece of music that I listened to during the Friday afternoon ritual. My seventh grade orchestra teacher would have all of us cram into the tiny music office every Friday, where the turntable was set up, and listen to the masters of classical music. We'd be squeezed together on the floor, on top of the desk, in each others' laps, elbow to elbow, dutifully remaining quiet and listening to our teacher's introductory remarks about Tchaikovsky, Beethoven and Rachmaninov, including why she

loved the pieces and why she chose them for us. Then she'd drop the needle on the vinyl LP. And though I can't remember which works we heard, what left a lasting impression on me to this day, almost fifty years later, was that my teacher considered listening to be an activity in and of itself, and that it carried importance and value.

During my freshman year of college, my music theory teacher conveyed the same message about the importance of listening, but with a different approach. Her name was Carolyn Hickman, and this was back in the day when smoking was allowed indoors. She'd have a pack of Marlboros in her blouse pocket with a lit cigarette hanging in her mouth. Ms. Hickman gave the assignment to listen to the first movement of Mozart's Symphony No. 40 and count how many times we heard the key modulate. I listened to it several times, yet I did not hear a single key modulation. I didn't know what a key modulation even was, which might explain why I didn't hear any. At the next class she asked us to tell her how many we heard. I said, "I didn't hear any modulations." The look on her face was disbelief and disdain. After removing the cigarette from her mouth, and with a most condescending voice she asked me incredulously, "Do you EVER listen to music!?!" as if I were the dumbest numbskull she had ever seen. So, in spite of being humiliated in front of my peers, I took to heart her message that the activity of listening carried great import.

Let's consider listening from another perspective. In the ancient Indian philosophy of Vedanta, the Vedic scripture *Brihadarnyaka Upanishad* lists three steps of studying and learning:

Shravana—listening to a teaching from one's teacher and scriptures.

Manana—contemplating in order to understand what one has heard.

Nidhidhyasana—meditating on the teachings to make them one's own experience, to apply them and have them become a living reality in one's daily life.

The ancient sages pointed out many benefits of putting forth this three-pronged approach of listening attentively, then to study and then to apply what we learn. Just by listening with great care to the teachings of the Masters we can bring discipline and refinement to the mind and share the consciousness of great souls. Listening to teachings of the Truth can serve as a vantage point from which to view what happens to us; as a touchstone to help us through difficult moments, and as a foundation that can help us turn our experience of life into knowledge, wisdom and joy. Through listening, the sages reassure us, we can ultimately explain the very meaning of our spiritual pursuit.

The 8th century Vedic sage Adi Shankaracharya extols the power of listening, noting that for rare people, just hearing once the great Truth *tat twam asi,* "thou art that", is enough for them to internalize its full meaning. From the act of listening alone, it is pos-

sible to fully realize the Immortal Self as one's true nature, and thus become liberated.

The sages caution us, however, that our senses of perception are very delicate and we must do what we can to protect them and give them more power. Ultimately what gives our sense of hearing the most power is our divine awareness and our inner experiences of the Truth. In order to develop this awareness, Indian scriptures recommend techniques to strengthen a human being's innate ability to listen. Specifically, they mention listening with great absorption to musical sounds, particularly those produced by classical Indian instruments. These sounds have the power to purify the sense of hearing and also to strengthen the cells and subtle nerves of the auditory system. The sounds of these musical instruments are able to access places in the body that even medicine cannot reach. Listening to these sounds strengthens your heart because focusing your attention on natural sounds cleanses your mind of worldly concerns, and increases your capacity to bear the turmoil of the world.

Another benefit of meditating on the sound of classical Indian instruments is that they guide the listener to deep states where one can hear the ten divine sounds, known as nada. Nada are also known as unstruck sounds because they are heard in the subtle world. Hearing them indicates that progress is being made on the spiritual journey. The instruments the sages describe are the conche (also called the *shanka*) that mimics the ocean; the rumbling drums that echo the earth; bells that evoke the wind; ringing cymbals which evoke the sparks of fire, the flute and vina which lead to blissful devotion, and finally, thunder is considered to be the most powerful of all. Hearing thunder in meditation is considered a signpost of the completion of the spiritual journey

The Gayatri mantra structure refers to a Vedic hymn meter with three lines, each with eight syllables. The Shanka (Conche) based on the Rig Veda mantra translates:

Om. May we come to know pancha janya
Whose unstruck sound is the creator and uniter of all beings.
May we meditate on this sound which arose from the center
of the thousand pedaled lotus.
May shanka (the divine conche), whose sound reveals the state of freedom,
illumine our path and enlighten us.

The Path

The path that I am referring to is the 34 Tattvas (states of vibration) of Kashmir Shaivism, a 10th century Indian philosophical system. The action of listening through the lens of Shaivite philosophy is that creation constantly flows through the 34 tattvas. These levels of vibration are organized in three large categories called gunas (qualities): tamasic (impure) rajasic (both impure and pure) and sattvic (pure.)

The 34 Tattvas refer to the continuous levels of vibration of the universe. Depending on our state of mind and/or heart, we create each moment of our lives with a particular

vibration, which will be in sync with one of these levels. The 34th level is the lowest with zero the highest. The lowest levels (20s and 30s) correspond to the dense gross elements of the physical body, the actual physical ears, along with evil or ignorant intentions and passive listening or forcing others to listen against their will. The levels in the high teens to mid single digits correspond to the more subtle vibrations of our emotional states, as well as our ego, mind and intellect and neutral intentions. Most musicians in the world perform from these levels. The highest level, the Sattvic level, is from about five to zero. It refers to the finest vibrations of the ethereal spirit and the divine soul and the pure intention to know and love our own divine nature. It is at the top three levels that nada, the unstruck sounds, can be heard in meditation. The interesting aspect of listening is that auditory events and our intentions are intertwined through all 34 levels. The world that we create at any given moment corresponds with our choices and intentions which determine the level of the Tattvas that will become the path for our reality. In other words, we have a choice in each moment to align ourselves with any vibration we choose.

Let's share examples from each of the three categories of the gunas. We can begin with Tamas, the lowest, grossest level of Tattvas usually described as including levels 34 to 19. This is where darkness and ignorance represent the dominant vibration. The vibration is not only from the sound but include the vibration of the intention behind it. From the lowest Tamasic level, listening is used as a weapon for torture and for propaganda in genocide. The posture of the heart, the intent of the listening, is cloaked in ignorance and impurity.

A fascinating example of this is the modern case of Simon Bikindi, a popular musician in Rwanda. Bikindi was the first musician in history to be arrested and convicted of war crimes. He was charged as the composer of songs that were used during the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, a horrific event in which 800,000 people were hacked to death by machete at the hands of their fellow countrymen in a matter of 100 days. The International Court Tribunal of Rwanda arrested him on six counts of crimes against humanity. The prosecutors argued that because his hate-filled songs were blasted over public speakers, the people who heard these songs were incited to commit violence. At the conclusion of his trial in 2008, five of the six counts were dropped due to lack of sufficient evidence. However, Bikindi was ultimately indicted on the sixth count which was "Direct and Public Incitement to Commit Genocide." The court stated in its judgement that it was "a crime of the most serious gravity which affects the very foundations of our society and shocks the conscience of humanity." He was sentenced to 15 years in prison but was released in 2016. Bikindi died in 2018, and his songs continue to be banned in Rwanda.[1]

Here are two examples of listening from the next finer vibratory guna, the Rajasic level, which is described as both pure and impure, corresponding roughly to levels 19 to

[1] The American Civil Liberties Union has represented musicians who oppose their music being used for "enhanced interrogation techniques" at Guantánamo Bay prison where, among other things, they blare music at an excruciating volume for days on end.

six. This is nicely exemplified by sign language interpreters. During graduate school I took "German for Reading Knowledge." One of the students in this class was deaf and had hired a professional sign language interpreter. I was enthralled watching the interpreter. The skill set it took for her to listen with laser focus to German words, which she had never heard before, and then finger spell them into American Sign Language was incredible. Since the interpreter is forced to set aside any consideration of her own ego in order to listen accurately, and her intention is to help her deaf client, it has pure qualities. But it continues to be a Rajasic form of listening because the senses are still directed outward with no goal other than to convey information. There is no turning within.

Another example of the Rajasic quality is portrayed by the 12 tone music of Arnold Schoenberg. During my doctorate program, I had to present a one hour lecture about his opera *Erwartung*. I learned that his motivation for creating the 12 tone system was his hypothesis that if music was completely free from standard harmonic progressions it would force the listener to be in a state of non-expectation. Schoenberg was convinced that his 12 tone method would allow listeners to enter a transcendental state where they could experience unconditional love. I found it a fascinating premise. With that knowledge, I was able to listen to his opera with an interest to see what happened within me, rather than to form an opinion about whether the music was good or not ahead of time. I was blown away when I actually experienced this state of non-expectation.

And finally, listening at the Tattva levels of around five to zero, which are in the Sattvic guna (or pure quality) can be achieved by chanting the name of God, writing song lyrics to uplift humanity, and listening to nada, the divine unstruck sounds.

Divine

Because I listened to nada's resonance
And gazed upon the blazing fire,
I drank the pouring nectar
And transcended birth and death.
—Akkamahadevi (c. 1130–1160)

The 13th century text *Sangita Ratnakara* elucidates music from the yogic perspective. Its author, Sharanga Deva, describes the primordial sound as the source and the goal of music. The primordial sound is called nada and he suggests that the entire cosmos sprang forth from sound. This phenomenon, this divine pulsation, is called spanda. From this perspective all sounds are ultimately divine, every note can be considered a deity when you listen attentively and follow sound to the original source, or nada.

I once attended a weekend meditation retreat. During lunch, I took a walk in the neighborhood and heard a garbage truck squeak loudly as it lifted up a dumpster. Without any conscious intention or thought on my part, I heard the squeak all the way from

the gross physical level through to its original source or nada. I heard bliss in the squeak. I became ecstatic from the squeak of a garbage truck!

Sharanga Deva wrote, "We worship Nada Brahman, the Absolute, in the form of sound. The incomparable bliss that is the consciousness within all beings, and the revealer of the universal Self." The vibration of nada Brahman is also called *anahata nada*, the unstruck sound. Because this sound is not created by striking two objects together, it is described as self-born. Advanced meditators will experience it usually in a specific order, culminating in the sound of thunder. 20th century renunciant, Swami Muktananda, in his spiritual autobiography, *Play of Consciousness*, wrote, "I heard one after the other, the grades of nada. Chin chin, chin chinna, the bell, the conch, the vina, the cymbals, the flute, the mridrangam, the kettle drum and thunder. In this way I heard the ten divine sounds, one after another."

Recognition

Recognition has more levels than mere mental recall or perception, like recognizing your childhood home in a photograph. There is intellectual recognition, then there is divine recognition.

Aaron Copland's book "What to Listen for in Music" (1939) focused on intellectual recognition. He described how to hear patterns and cadences, and how to recognize other techniques that composers use so that listeners could become familiar with them and appreciate these aspects. However, Copland's audience was the highbrow, those in society who were privileged with the means and education to have access to live performances of classical music. There was and continues to be a need for this type of essay for the listener of classical music.

In 1989 I took "Seminar in New Music" at the University of Oregon. The instructor played a recording of a work by Arvo Pärt called *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten* composed in 1977. I had never heard it and was deeply moved by its intensity. I immediately wanted to listen to it again. The professor asked the class what they heard. A fellow student responded with snark, "This is such a simple piece. It's just a descending A minor scale played over and over again in different rhythms. This Pärt guy probably composed it in fifteen minutes."

I was embarrassed because I did not recognize that the piece was constructed on the descending A minor scale, or that it was the only thing going on. I decided not to raise my hand to reveal what I heard, which was a deeply moving piece. But looking back at this moment years later, I understand that my recognition was at a different level than my snooty colleague. In relation to the Tattvas, his listening led him to a recognition at the level of the 12th Tattva where the intellect vibrates, and my listening led me to a recognition at the Tattva level seven, where strong emotions vibrate.

Listening:
A Path to Divine Recognition

According to the philosophical system of Shaivism, recognition is both a means and a goal: the goal is for us to come to the awareness of our own divine consciousness and in that awareness, understanding that this sensibility has always been within us. Recognition in this context is not a thought, but rather an immediate certainty, a sense of familiarity or rightness. This experience is to recognize one's own Self as divine, gloriously luminous and brimming with ecstasy. This happens in the final stages of spiritual pursuit.

When we have these moments of recognition, we come to see how the master composers, poets, renunciants and philosophers were expressing this recognition of their divine self through their craft. May we all enjoy listening our way along the path to divine recognition.

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
The holy time is quiet as a Nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea'
Listen! The mighty Being is awake,
And doth with His eternal motion make
A sound like Thunde—everlastingly . . .
—William Wordsworth

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