

Listening to dissonance: Invoking a reflexive listening practice in researching musical experience

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Abstract

The recent “sonic turn” in the human sciences has introduced new sets of questions and methodologies, foregrounding sound, hearing and listening and critiquing conventional ways of understanding them. In this article I examine theories of listening and trace the history of analytical listening practices, which aim to produce objective knowledge. I compare these with receptive listening practices, which aim for subjective understanding. I then examine seminal musical ethnographies in which encounters with dissonant sounds, social interactions and listening practices led to transformations in understanding musical experience. I conclude that a reflexive and open listening practice in fieldwork would precede, but not replace, analytical listening.

Keywords: listening, phenomenology, fieldwork, methodology, epistemology, sound studies

Speaking of listening

The ability to listen well lies at the heart of the ethnomusicologist's work; yet, the ways in which we listen remain largely unexamined. The recent “sonic turn”,¹ which has informed scholarship across the human sciences, offers opportunities to do this. Displacing the late-twentieth-century “spatial turn”—which drew on metaphors of space and place to analyse power relations and questions of identity—the sonic turn introduced new sets of questions and methodologies, foregrounding sound, hearing and listening and critiquing conventional ways of understanding them. Central to this interdisciplinary field are phenomenological and epistemological questions relating to sound.

Already, this suggests a dichotomy between approaches seeking objective knowledge and those aimed at subjective understanding. While it is no longer sufficient to observe, record, transcribe and analyse in order to explain musical culture, this work is still a necessary part of producing a musical ethnography. The emphasis in fieldwork, however, has shifted towards a collaborative approach to understanding others' lived musical experience and a reflexive methodology, involving an examination of the values, assumptions and habits of mind one brings to the field (Titon 2008).² Reflexivity also applies to one of the ethnomusicologist's essential research tools: listening practices and the values and attitudes they incorporate.

In this article I focus on how we listen and the techniques by which we come to experience sounds and to know them. I examine a range of theories and practices as well as the implications of employing certain kinds of listening in ethnomusicological research. I then turn to seminal works of musical ethnography in which the authors reveal how interrogating ways of listening that to them were socially or musically dissonant, led to transformations in their understanding of musical experience. I conclude by advocating that a reflexive and open listening practice in fieldwork precedes a more focused and analytical listening. But first, I want to consider what we mean when we speak of listening.

Listening is a particular way of being in the world and of acknowledging our relationships with that world and the people in it. Questions about what it means to listen—and to be a *good listener*—have exercised philosophers across the centuries and fall into two distinct categories. Our everyday understanding of the good listener draws on Aristotle's concept of

human communication as a virtue that is neither excessive nor deficient and is motivated by good intentions. This kind of good listening is necessary if we are to communicate with others, especially if we are to understand their musical practice.³ Among many twentieth-century philosophers concerned with listening and whose work adopts an Aristotelian view, John Dewey advocated *transactional listening* to all voices in a conversation in order to achieve cooperative action (Waks 2011). Martin Buber's *receptive listener* 'embraces' the speaker with their full attention in order to understand them, rather than delimiting understanding by focusing on the listener's own preoccupations, which is the hallmark of Platonic dialogue (Gordon 2011).

The analytical listening that derives from Plato's philosophical practice differs sharply from Aristotle's approach in being directed less at the speaker than at the content of their speech. In the *Symposium*, Plato's listener Socrates seeks to clarify a question that preoccupies him by probing his interlocutor, frequently interrupting him, drawing out inferences and then critiquing them.⁴ This dialectical process relies on listening that is both analytic and logocentric. Logocentrism—the belief in language's power to represent reality—underpins the post-Enlightenment scientific-philosophical model of inquiry, which in universities is evident in research design and protocols. For example, ethnomusicologists are required to formulate questions and hypotheses ahead of going into the field. This process circumscribes the range of possible findings and limits communication, especially with those whose epistemologies do not valorize—indeed, may shun—questioning as a means of acquiring and sharing knowledge.⁵ When we listen to our musical collaborators, are we silently formulating questions—listening analytically and logocentrically—or are we fully receptive to their performance? We cannot do both adequately, for, as Martin Buber's concept of the receptive listener suggests and phenomenologist Don Ihde (2007: 135) maintains, the mind resists simultaneously "thinking in a language" and "imaginatively presenting music".

The musical ethnography, however, attempts both to "imaginatively present music" through shared musical experiences and then to analyse and represent these experiences in language. Each of these approaches requires a different kind of listening. To such an apparent misalliance, a reflexive listening practice can be useful both in identifying and, when necessary, setting aside listening practices learned in the music academy and also in allowing an opening to the possibility that others are listening differently and thus understanding their musical experience in a different way. For listening, like music, is socially constructed within a coherent cultural system and listening practices vary across social groups and cultures (Leppert 2004; Erlmann 2004; Augoyard and Torgue 2005; Rice 2008; Tilton 2008). How, then, do we define and differentiate ways of listening?

Analytical listening in modernity

The act of listening is the way we come to know sound, but the nature of that knowledge varies according to the way we come by it—the way we listen. Just as looking at an object entails distinguishing it from a visual field, so listening is a matter of distinguishing a sound from its aural field. Listening, as opposed to hearing, is a matter of intention. Or, to put it another way, *hearing* is a physiological phenomenon, but *listening* is a psychological act (Barthes 1985: 245).

Scholars across a number of disciplines have distinguished different modes of listening and, in particular, listening to music. Their taxonomies differ, but their categories invariably define the aim of a particular type of listening, the degree of attentiveness that we give to it—from distracted listening which barely registers sounds to intensely focused analytical listening—and the breadth or focus of the aural field.

In 1976, Roland Barthes provided one of the earliest frameworks for differentiating types of listening. He identified three types of listening, each concerned with a different object. *Indexical listening* is aimed at identifying sounds, while *deciphering* seeks to decode the meaning of a sound. A third listening is aimed at *who* speaks in the intersubjective space between unconscious and unconscious: *psychoanalytic listening*. (Barthes 1985)

French composer and film theorist Michel Chion (1994) similarly distinguishes *causal listening* (to identify a sound's cause or source) from *semantic listening* (which interprets sound according to a known code, as in speech). His third category, *reduced listening* (a focus on the textures of sounds), rather than taking into account intersubjectivity as Barthes does, moves in the opposite direction to a focused intellectual scrutiny. In Chion's typology, each kind of listening has a different interpretive aim (source; meaning; texture).

By contrast, music educationist Lucy Green's (2011) classification of young popular musicians' listening practices aligns the listening aim with its degree of intensity—the breadth or narrowness of focus within the same aural field: *distracted listening* (with intermittent attention, for pleasure and enculturation), *attentive listening* (to identify melody, structure, and instrumental technique) and *purposive listening* (with the intention of imitating the sounds).

In modernity, professional listening—including professional listening to music—has become more specialised and more intense, within a more narrowly focused aural field. At the same time, this field has become increasingly crowded as a consequence of urbanisation and the ubiquitous presence of sound technologies. This narrowly focused listening is a highly specialised technique and it has a history.

While numerous historians have sought to understand the past by reimagining its sounds and interpreting their significance,⁶ several important histories have investigated the social construction of modern listening practices. We know, for example, that by the twentieth century, silent listening to symphony concerts had become institutionalized as an important ritual of the middle class (Small 1998). James H. Johnson (1995) has traced the origin of this silent listening to behavioural changes among Parisian art-music audiences. Once art music evoking emotions emerged in the late-eighteenth century, audience members had to abandon their chattering in order to engage with its aesthetic demands. Sociologist Richard Sennett (1977: 210) interprets this silence also as a sign of the emerging bourgeoisie's anxiety about embarrassing themselves in public, as well as their need to establish protocols to distinguish themselves from lower social classes. These concerns were met when audiences listened attentively for emotional cues in the music, but then contained their responses within a private sphere of feeling.

This is just one example of how the social and cultural conditions of modernity—the expansion of capitalism, science, rationalism, industrialization and colonialism—transformed constructs and practices of listening. In *The Audible Past* (2003), Jonathan Sterne argues that it was this new interest in listening that gave rise to sound reproduction technologies, rather than these technologies being the sole driver of change in listening practices. One example was the invention of the stethoscope, which coincided with both the industrialization of the West and the professionalisation of medical practice in the early nineteenth century. This scientific apparatus “industrialised” the process of examining a patient, delegating the process of listening to the body and thereby promoting the social distance from that body that the rising class of doctors desired. The stethoscope also introduced a new technique of listening, in which the listener was isolated from the surrounding sonic environment in order to focus on one class of sounds. This *audile technique*, as Sterne calls it, is associated with bourgeois individuals and their social status, with science and industrialization, and with commodities—all characteristics of modernity (see also Nicolson 2012).

By the early twentieth century similar focused listening techniques were adopted in relation to music, facilitated by the development of sound production and recording technologies. Theodor Adorno (2002) (who in the 1930s denigrated listeners to recorded popular-music genres as passive and distracted) and later Barry Truax (1984) and Murray Schafer (1977) (who coined the term “schizophonia” for the way a recording “splits” sound from its source) are typical of many twentieth-century commentators who registered an anxiety about audience alienation when listening to technologically mediated music. This anxiety echoes a broader and continuing concern about social and political alienation in modernity; and yet, while sound technologies may have diminished some opportunities for face-to-face communication, at the same time others were opened. An example is the telephone’s intimate voice-to-ear communication, which alleviated the tyranny of distance at a time of vast population movement due to urbanization and migration. This paradoxically alienated and intimate connection is one that radio both amplified and exploited. Scholars of popular music and media history have amply demonstrated how allegedly passive and alienated listening to radio and recordings actually enhanced listeners’ personal and collective identifications. Michelle Hilmes (2012) is one among many who asserts that radio audiences actively engage with the music they hear and construct a sense of collectivity similar to that of the “imagined communities” of nations theorized by Benedict Anderson. Lizabeth Cohen (1991), writing about Chicago’s industrial workers between the world wars, similarly concludes that radio reinforced their ethnic, religious and class affiliations.

Because radio communication was largely in only one direction, it made a powerful ideological tool. Ethnomusicologists—including, among many others, Mark Slobin (1976) and John Baily (1988) in Afghanistan and Timothy Rice (1994) in Bulgaria—have demonstrated how radio in emerging nations offered musicians the chance to perform professionally and to learn from others beyond the reach of their everyday lives, while noting the price paid for these opportunities. For, as rural peasant societies transformed into nation states and musicians were called upon to adopt urban tastes, individualism, commodified musical performance and a repertoire that symbolized national unity, those musicians’ role in performing community locally inevitably diminished.

Our listening today is equally susceptible to the operation of ideology. I have argued elsewhere (O’Shea 2008: 5–6; O’Shea 2009) that musical meanings do not inhere in musical texts, but in the discourses within which they are performed and received. Or, as Sarah Weiss (2014) puts it, people’s expectations shape their assessment of what they hear: we listen to the world, but hear ourselves. A similar partiality is at work in the techniques we adopt when we listen to music, as musicologist Ian Biddle (2011) reminds us. In arguing that our specific historical locations and scholarly traditions make audible certain kinds of listening, while silencing others, Biddle examines the development of what he calls *regimes of fixated listening* within his own discipline.

In *reduced listening*, the listener aims for complete detachment from the music’s formal and cultural meanings in order to focus on its “raw sonic qualities”, the properties of the sounds themselves. Developed by Pierre Schaeffer (1966), who combined such decontextualised sounds in his *musique concrète* compositions, this technique relies on repeated listening to recordings. With the listener in an acousmatic situation—Schaeffer’s term for the separation in time and space between the producer of the sound and the listener—sound becomes an object and listening becomes objective.

Biddle also discusses *structural hearing*, developed by Schenker (1922) and later Salzer (1962), which involves “training the ear to hear not only...melodic lines and chord progressions but also their structural significance and coherence” (Biddle 2011: 70). Adorno (2002) advocated structural listening in the 1930s for “expert” listening in the concert hall. Musicologist Rose Subotnik (1996: 150) critiques this technique not only for valorising

intricately structured music and encouraging the listener to depend on scores, but also for giving a secondary status to actual musical sound.

Both reduced listening and structural hearing are fixated listening techniques, yet they could scarcely be more different in their aims and their defined aural field: one attending to sound qualities by seeking to ignore music's formal and cultural meanings, the other seeking out all available meanings. Biddle's point is that both techniques require the intense disciplining of body and mind to enable a particularly forensic listening. Like Johnson and Sennett and Sterne, Biddle regards the emergence of such disciplinary forms of listening as a response within the urban middle class to rapid changes in social conditions and cultural practices. Biddle (2011: 72) refers to the "fantasy of the autonomous citizen" in modernity: privileged, exemplary and unencumbered by the constraints of pre-modern allegiances such as religion and clan. It is this fantasy, he argues, that facilitates

a way of thinking about the sonic environment as a site of contagion that must be stilled, hushed, managed, or curtailed such that musicology's fixated modality of listening can be installed; and it ensures a systematic and protracted institutional disdain for the vernacular more widely. (Biddle 2011: 72)

Sound—and particularly musical sound—needs to be controlled and managed in much the same way as the exemplary modern citizen manages the development of the body through physical disciplines and of the mind through disciplined reading. Fixated listening provides an exemplar for Michel Foucault's (1976) argument that the body in its various sensory modes is disciplined in modernity as a site of the execution of power.

While ethnomusicologists tend to conduct their research in communities of listeners, modern, bourgeois subjectivity calls for individualistic techniques when listening to music. In addition to the fixated listening techniques of *structural hearing* and *reduced listening* with which Biddle is concerned, phenomenologies of music listening such as those of Thomas Clifton (1983), Lawrence Ferrara (1984) and Don Ihde (2007)—and, arguably, Murray Schafer's *ear cleaning* (1969)—prescribe highly disciplined listening regimes. In each case, the mindful listener undertakes a stepped procedure in order to identify characteristics of musical sounds. Despite an emphasis on the receptive *experience* of listening, the resulting analysis is a cognitive undertaking, a categorisation.⁷

Musicians trained in Western art music use similar listening techniques in their musical education, which gives primacy to the written score. Yet for ethnomusicologists in the field, learning "by ear" is far more prevalent and may involve a variety of listening techniques. Learning to play an instrument by reading from "the music" not only makes it extremely difficult to then play "by ear" or to improvise on that instrument, but it internalizes certain assumptions about how music should sound—the "correct" forms, tunings, rhythms—and how it should be learned. Let me give some examples from musicians learning Irish traditional music, which today includes learners of varied ages, musical experience and cultural backgrounds.

In a study of adult learners of Irish traditional music (O'Shea 2009), I found that classically trained violinists generally approached their learning analytically rather than holistically—a distinction Paul van den Bos (1995) makes—in a series of steps: first they learned melody, then rhythm, then embellishment and finally style. This reflected not only the sequence in which they had learned to play the classical repertoire, but also the degree of difficulty they anticipated and then experienced with aspects of Irish music. Melody was straightforward (until they encountered alternative versions of tunes) but they found it difficult to reproduce the rhythm and phrasing they heard from teachers or other source musicians. The rhythm they produced sounded as if they had internalized the notation of the tune—for example, a reel played with evenly weighted notes. This recalls a notorious segment of the 1991 television program *Bringing it All Back Home*, in which fiddle player Frankie Gavin tries to

teach violinist Yehudi Menuhin to play a hornpipe.⁸ Not only does the violinist fail to reproduce the fiddler's nuanced hornpipe rhythm, playing instead a jerky dotted quaver–semi-quaver beat, but he also appears cheerfully oblivious to that failure. Rose Subotnik (1996: 150) reveals a similar consequence of her training in musicological listening, when she admits to a habit of mentally “correcting” recordings as she listens to them.

In popular-music genres most beginners are self-taught and learn aurally and, since their models are recordings, their learning is rarely supplemented by notation. Among scholars who have researched how aspiring rock musicians learn (Finnegan 1989; Lilliestam 1996; Bennett 1980; Cohen 1991), Lucy Green (2011) has paid particular attention to their listening strategies. Green finds them employing a range of listening techniques and intensities and identifies three solitary listening practices: *distracted*, *attentive* and *purposive listening*. From immersion in a musical genre to paying attention to its formal characteristics to a fixated, repetitive listening aimed at an accurate imitation, Green's young musicians use these solitary techniques in varying combinations. They also act as a preparation for their collaborative and experimental learning at band practice, which involves listening to their own playing in relation to other musicians and to the overall group sound. Yet most of their aural learning involves fixated listening techniques aimed at identifying and then imitating specific aspects of a recorded musical performance, techniques that closely resemble those in the conservatorium.

These various accounts of modern listening techniques suggest an individualistic, cognitive engagement with a sonic object that must be mastered and controlled with logical thought, as philosopher Gemma Corradi Fiumara (1990) has argued. When Rose Subotnik (1996: 150) describes structural hearing as giving the listener “the sense of composing the piece as it actualizes itself in time”, she points to its alignment with this dialectical, logocentric rationality, in which the listener's own voice is activated. Such listening is atomized, regulated and demands self-discipline. Yet, music—or musicking, to use Christopher Small's (1998) term—is not purely cognitive, but an experience that is embodied and social.

Composing a receptive listening

If the act of listening is the way we come to know sound, socially and through the body, then a number of contemporary composers have been especially attuned to that act. Discussions of sound and listening invariably refer to the “soundscape”, a term coined by Canadian composer and music educationist R. Murray Schafer (1977) for the whole acoustic environment audible to humans, including sounds of nature, of human activities and technologies. Schafer made recordings of these diverse sounds and then used them to produce compositions. Referring to these pioneering works, German philosopher Gernot Böhme (2017: 186–7) writes that “What, viewed from the side of music, was a development leading to a widening of musical material was, viewed from the side of the soundscape, a discovery of the musicality of the world itself.”

The concept of the world's musicality and the invocation to audiences to listen creatively and critically also underpin the work of two significant electronic art-music composers. Pauline Oliveros (1932–2016) often told the story of when she first used her reel-to-reel tape recorder and noticed that the microphone had picked up sounds she had not heard consciously. This radically changed her understanding of listening and she resolved henceforth to “Listen to everything all the time and remind yourself when you are not listening” (2010: 28). Her “deep listening” practice of conscious listening sought to balance listening that is focused, linear and exclusive with listening that is open, global, receptive and inclusive. “Focal listening”, Oliveros writes (2012: iii), “is concentrated, moment-to-moment attention to details, such as a phrase or phrases of music. Inclusive listening is receptive to

all that can be heard in an ever expanding field of continuous simultaneous events perceived as a whole.” Exclusive listening takes hard work and practice; receptive listening requires relaxation and openness. These two listening modes work together as expansion and contraction (2010: 29). In both cases, however, listening is a conscious act or, as Oliveros puts it, echoing Barthes, “The ear does not listen – the brain listens” (Peña Young 2011).

While Oliveros explored improvised sound on her accordion and is perhaps best known for *Deep Listening* (1989), a recording of instrumental sounds made in a cistern with extraordinary acoustics, her iconic practice was a “deep listening” event in which she instructed participants to interact with sound, listening to sounds and producing them. In theorising her practice, she expanded the categories from focused or open listening to include making, imagining and remembering sound.

British composer Katharine Norman (1996) theorises three interdependent *stances* in our “everyday listening”. In *referential listening*, we use memory to identify sound sources, while in *reflective listening* we search the content of sounds for metaphors to describe them, much the same typology as developed by Barthes. Norman proposes that we continually shift between these two stances, resulting in *contextual listening* as we search for “informing relationships” in the sounds—accent, intonation, speech rhythms, or imagined verbal content—to “make sense” of them. In her compositions, she remixes recordings of “real-world sounds” into a sonic “poetry” that invites the listener’s simultaneous recognition and imaginative reinterpretation. Norman calls this process *participatory listening* and compares it with the lateral thinking involved in solving cryptic crosswords.

Both Oliveros and Norman have encouraged their audiences to listen openly and creatively, transcending the habitual listening that (necessarily) censors the everyday sounded environment. In a related endeavour, Jean-François Augoyard and his colleagues at CRESSON⁹ have produced *Sonic Experience*, a glossary of “sonic effects” that codifies people’s experiences of everyday sounds in built spaces and the urban environment. Importantly, they stress that “[t]here is no universal approach to listening: every individual, every group, every culture listens in its own way” (Augoyard and Torgue 2005: 5).

Augoyard’s “sonic experience” and the participatory listening promoted by Oliveros and Norman align with what might be called Aristotelian or receptive philosophies of listening, in that they emphasize subjective and intersubjective experience. Analytical listening, on the other hand, valorises reason and science, a distinction between self and other and a belief in objective knowledge. When applied in fixated listening techniques, its aim is to systematically distinguish one class of sound from another. These differing approaches to sound as an object of knowledge to be analysed and named, or as an experience to be shared and understood, correspond to epistemological and phenomenological listening respectively. Each of these is employed in the work of anthropologists and ethnomusicologists, to whose deliberations on questions of listening I now turn.

Listening in ethnomusicology

In her ground-breaking *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-century Colombia* (2014), Ana María Ocha Gautier historicizes listening tactics and interpretive strategies in literary, political, folkloristic and linguistic discourses. Of particular significance is her examination of transcriptions of indigenous voices, in which “mishearing” becomes a tool for their disciplining and incorporation as part of the colonial project. In demonstrating how sound technologies have enabled certain kinds of listening, she alerts us to the partialities embedded in the listening practices of both researchers and their subjects. In this she provides a model for the “sounded anthropology” she and others have advocated, encouraging their colleagues to examine their discipline’s historical use of sound technologies (Samuels et al. 2010).

Recording technologies have allowed musicians—from London rock bands to traditional dance musicians in rural Afghanistan—to adopt fixated listening techniques that will enhance their repertoire, performance, reputation and economic circumstances. A century ago, gramophone recordings allowed musicians to scrutinize and imitate the performances of distant virtuosos and perhaps to become recording stars themselves. Later, tape recorders and then small personal recorders facilitated listening to their own cohort and to themselves. More recently, electronic technologies have greatly amplified the capacity for musicians to record and compose outside commercial studios. Over the same period, however, ethnomusicologists have used recording technologies for different ends.

From its earliest days, ethnomusicology has placed high value on collecting archival recordings, a practice that has been critiqued as creating a sense of nostalgia for the “living dead” (Sterne 2003: 287–333). The logic of the archive is as a repository for the relics of dying peoples, an aspect of what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1989) calls “imperialist nostalgia” for the way colonialism mourns that which it has destroyed. Ethnomusicology’s archive recordings align with the discourse of traditionalism, which thrives in a period of detraditionalisation. Many such recordings now circulate in the global market for world music as the commodified sounds of nostalgia. The ethical status of these recordings has been debated at length, most influentially around Paul Simon’s *Graceland* (for example, Meintjes 1990) and more recently in Ochoa Gautier’s (2006) work on the role of recording, circulating, recontextualizing and resignifying “traditional” music in establishing modernity in Latin America.

The level of detail available to the listener gives the impression that the field recording is a simulacrum, a “virtual reality” that we take for granted, when in fact the sound is isolated from aspects of the musical experience crucial to understanding it. These include the musicians’ identities, their gestures, their relationship to listeners, the spatial context and the social meanings and political implications of their performance. Barry Truax (1984: 117–20) regards the storage of such recordings as a process that not only abstracts sounds, but also transforms them into objects. An archived sound recording thus becomes at once a source of nostalgic recollection and an object to be scrutinised.

Whether or not they choose to identify as insiders or outsiders to the music culture studied, ethnomusicologists’ techniques and purposes in listening in the field invariably differ critically from those of their subjects. They listen for many purposes, including: to learn musical performance skills and witness others teaching and learning; to catch the interplay among musicians and other participants; and to gain an understanding of cultural values and attitudes. These various aims call for a range of listening practices, from a multiply focused listening within the broader soundscape to and immersion in musical performance to the fixated listening required when transcribing field recordings. Each practice has its own scope and validity.

A reflexive listening, which seeks to identify the presumptions embedded in one’s habitual practices, also differentiates the researcher’s listening from those of collaborators in the field. Such recognition can be used to great advantage, especially when the researcher accepts the possibility of being wrong and takes a leap into an unfamiliar way of understanding musical experience, including learning processes and performance skills. I now consider how esteemed ethnomusicologists have employed a reflexive listening practice in their encounters with *dissonance*, in its broader sense of social disharmony or disagreement as well as musical disharmony. Each of these encounters led to an understanding of listening practices radically different from the fixated listening of the music academy and to a kind of epiphany.

Multiply focused listening in the rainforest

Steven Feld recalls the day in 1975 when he arrived in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea, to begin the fieldwork that resulted in his seminal work, *Sound and Sentiment* (1990):

Somebody had died. They said, Get your tape recorder. I didn't understand the language. I didn't know *anything!* So here I am, wham! With big Nagra [tape recorder] and headphones and microphone sitting among all these people who were weeping. I just sort of closed my eyes and listened and realized that I could easily spend a year trying to figure out the first sounds I was hearing. (Feld and Brenneis 2004: 464)

That was Feld's starting point: closed eyes, fixated listening, technologically mediated, socially alienated. As he later wrote, about taking a virtual respite from the field by listening to his private music collection, "Headphones were my best being there way to not be there" (2005: 139). But headphones also led to a useful realization. After recruiting local men to help process his field recordings, Feld experienced and resolved a certain social dissonance when he found that they were neither comfortable, nor productive, until he ditched the sound-isolating headphones for others that allowed the men to talk to one another while they were listening to the tapes. This, as it turned out, was a key to their practice of listening. For Kaluli, Feld writes, "want to be listening with others, and they want to be talking and multiply focused while they are listening" (2005: 140). Rather than "not be there" inside headphones, they wanted to "be there" in the fullness of the social and environmental soundscape of the rainforest. Feld correlates this realisation with phenomenologist Alfred Schutz's (1951) influential formulation, *mutual tuning-in*, for the non-verbal, face-to-face communication between musicians.

Multiply focused listening is by no means confined to the rainforest and is evident in many forms and styles of group musical performances. Benjamin Brinner, for example, identifies in Javanese gamelan performance a listening technique he describes as *filtering*, in which

musicians seek out which of the many sounds carry the information most crucial for satisfactory performance. Because so many aspects of performance are flexible, musicians cannot close their ears and play their own parts while blocking out all others. They must be able to recognize cues in the musical flow. (Brinner 1999: 24)

For the Kaluli, however, this multiply focused listening is also key to their *acoustemology*, Feld's term for the collaborative overlapping of sounds that echoed their relationship with and way of knowing their natural, mythical and social environment. This *lift-up-over sounding*, as the Kaluli call it, is evident in recordings Feld made in Bosavi and subsequently published on contact disc as *Voices of the Rainforest: A day in the life of the Kaluli people* (1991: 3). On one track, Kaluli men are cutting down trees and you can hear their whooping and whistling, singing and calling out, coordinating with the thud of their axes and interacting with one another and with birds calling in the rainforest. The listening that informs this "lift-up-over sounding" is dialogical rather than dialectical in its response to the multi-layered human, natural and supernatural soundscape.

Keith Briggs, a missionary who for twenty years had worked as an evangelical missionary among the Kaluli, experienced a different kind of dissonance in the Bosavi rainforest. Briggs disparaged his congregation for being individualistic and uncooperative because they could not sing hymns in unison. "They just can't sing together," he complained to Steven Feld (2005: 133–5). "They are all off in their own direction after just a few words." Feld, singing from an entirely different hymn sheet, disputed this interpretation, retorting that, while unison is unnatural to the Kaluli, they sing "very much together and with a common goal". Their lift-up-over sounding is precisely what is *most* cooperative about their singing and is opposed to the linear and hierarchical version of "singing together" that sounded right to the missionary. This exchange, together with the Kaluli practices of multiply focused listening and multiply layered "sounding", reveals how Feld's own listening practice had opened up since his initial

single focus on “people weeping” and the dissonance he encountered between the sound-isolating headphones and the Kaluli’s global listening, to use Pauline Oliveros’s term.

The dissonant sound of social harmony in the Andes

Thomas Turino grappled with a different clash of listening priorities and a different way of engaging with music collectively during the fieldwork among the Aymara people of Conima, in the highlands of southern Peru that informed his *tour de force*, *Moving Away from Silence* (1993). Turino (1989) records that his initial observations led him to propose a structural alignment of aesthetic and social values embedded in musical performance. In Conima, he writes, music was composed, rehearsed, and performed as a public and communal activity. Instrumental playing, even by complete novices, was learned during public fiesta performances. In contrast, Turino’s preference for practising his instrument in private was considered inexplicably odd. Turino (1989: 12) considered that the aesthetic ideal of instrumental ensembles “playing as one” and “sounding like one instrument” enacted the Aymara’s social values of group integration, consensus and solidarity. His observation of the social style of conflict avoidance also found its musical parallel in fiesta performances, where any male of the community might join in, regardless of musical ability, even when this resulted in musical dissonance:

During the period of my research, even when particularly inept ad hoc members were playing in a manner contrary to the aesthetic ideals ... or when individuals performed instruments whose tuning actually clashed with the sound of the ensemble, I never witnessed any public recognition of the problem, or an attempt to alter it. In one such case, two pitu musicians arrived to play with their ankuta flutes tuned a fourth above the taykas while the ensemble was using three ankutas tuned a fifth above. The resulting parallel second line dramatically ran counter to the way pitu ensembles should sound (as a number of musicians commented privately at a later time). Nonetheless, while everyone knew that there was a severe tuning problem, no one said anything or even appeared to take notice, and these individuals performed with the group throughout the fiesta ... they simply ignore bad playing or tuning problems within the ensemble. (1989: 18)¹⁰

The capacity to “perform long and loud with great spirit, providing a sonic event that inspires people to dance and enjoy themselves”, he discovered, was more important to the Aymara musicians than achieving the aesthetic ideal of “playing as one” was (1989: 19). Turino’s observations and his experience of musical dissonance at the fiesta helped him to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the aesthetic and social values embedded in musical performance. As he concludes (1989: 29), “ideally, the sonic result of musical performance becomes an iconic reproduction of the unified nature of the community. In actual performances, however, the aesthetic ideals are sometimes not realized because of the priorities placed on non-confrontational, egalitarian modes of social interaction”. In the case of Aymara musicians in Peru, then, musicians’ mutual tuning-in in order to play “as one” is overridden by tuning-in to the performance of community—even in the face of extended musical dissonance.

Listening to the body in Bulgaria and Brazil

In Timothy Rice’s experience, recounted in *May It Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music* (1994: 54), musical instruments were “learned but not taught” and practised in isolation, not communally. Rice noticed that boys beginning to play the Balkan bagpipe, the *gaida*, listened to the sounds and observed the hand movements of experienced musicians and then practised alone in the fields outside the village, flapping their fingers about and making a lot of noise, but no progress towards melody. When Rice went about learning the instrument, he chose a different path, locating a master musician whom he listened to,

observed and questioned. Although earning praise for his unusual ability to pick up melody, Rice was unsuccessful in learning to perform the intricate ornamentation that is a hallmark of the highly virtuosic *gaida* style.¹¹

Through years of perseverance, Rice remained unable to execute these rapid finger movements. In learning to play the instrument, he had begun “as a musicologist, conceptualizing musical structures”, he reflects (1994: 73). His listening, and his attempts to reproduce what he heard, replicated the approach of the classically trained fiddle students in my study. In order to achieve *gaida* style, Rice applied himself first to melody, then rhythm and finally to embellishment, which turned out to be “the inverse order of the traditional manner” (72). Later, when separated from his teacher, he “reverted to ethnomusicological technique: aural analysis and transcription” and attempted to transfer “nearly a thousand concepts per minute” onto his instrument. “Needless to say,” he notes drily, “my mind was very busy” (81). Eventually, prompted by an aural memory of his teacher referring to the importance of the warming-up exercise of moving the fingers rapidly without focusing on melody, Rice’s hands grasped what his mind could not. At that point he realised that in the “aural-visual-tactile” tradition of *gaida* playing (54), melody notes and their ornamentation were not separate concepts, but integrated. After a long detour, he finally understood the significance of the young boys flapping their fingers tunelessly, their dissonant “noodling” (65) in search of the *gaida* sound. Rice’s adoption of the acousmatic, fixated listening technique that transcription requires was not only insufficient, but actually exacerbated his difficulties. By separating the sounds he heard into “notes” and “embellishment” he distanced himself from the musician’s “gestures in handling his instrument” that Schutz (1951: 94) identifies as a key element of the non-verbal communication between musicians he calls mutual tuning-in.

If Timothy Rice’s experience learning *gaida* style demonstrates the insufficiency of listening acousmatically, Greg Downey’s (2002) analysis of how *capoeira* participants listen challenges any presumption that mutual tuning-in is necessarily a benign intersubjectivity congruent with musical and social cohesion. *Capoeira*, an Afro-Brazilian martial dance performed by two dancers to music performed by other *capoeiristas* (for example, Capoeira Muzenza Mundial 2015), is learned through an arduous apprenticeship in both music and dance components. As musicians, *capoeiristas* become accustomed to the bodily “meshing” of the physical and the sonic in playing the *berimbau*, a single-string bowed percussion instrument with a gourd resonator that is held against the body, such that when dancing they perceive movements in the music as immanent corporeal movements (for example, Mestre Paulão 2007). *Capoeiristas’* training as musicians involves improvising to create tensions with other instruments, a capacity that is embodied in the dance when the rhythms of the *berimbau* are experienced as promptings and opportunities for adversarial movements. Their mutual tuning-in is adversarial, its aim to embody dissonance.

This embodied dissonance, together with Timothy Rice’s struggles with *gaida* style, reminds us that it is in the body that music and understanding coincide. Listening, like music, is both intersubjective and embodied, a kind of touching in which sound penetrates the body and resonates within it (Ihde 2007: 45; Schafer 1977: 8; Barthes 1985: 251). What Rice calls the psychomotor process is an example of Husserl’s concept of the *double touch*, the body’s simultaneous interiority and exteriority, as when one hand touches the other, anticipating how another person would experience us and we them (Zahavi 2003: 105). This doubleness is analogous to the experience of listening, for both are exemplars of the inseparable and interdependent relation between the self and the other—an openness to the world that is echoed in Pauline Oliveros’s “global awareness” and contrasted with the fixated listening dominated by rationality.

Conclusion

In modernity, disciplines of listening have developed that are industrialised and commodified, valorising the privacy and individualism that are the preserve of the urban middle class. These disciplines complement the logocentric approach to research in the university, in which *our* questions take precedence over those of our collaborators. The study of music in the conservatorium encourages a particular, fixated form of listening that is dialectical and analytical and which abstracts and objectifies sound.

While fixated listening extends the range and amplifies the detail of what we hear, it is not the whole story when it comes to speaking about listening. I have argued that a reflexive practice that aims to identify our default listening techniques facilitates an openness to ways of listening that are not on our habitual “wave-length”. This in turn can lead to understandings of how listening may incorporate the interrelations of people and their environment (Feld); social relations in a community (Turino); or musical learning (Rice and Downey).

In this discussion I have grouped different kinds of listening according to their aims of objective knowledge or subjective understanding. Ethnomusicologists’ default listening will not always be analytical, however, just as that of their musical collaborators will not always be subjective. On the contrary, various kinds of focused listening are referred to in the ethnographies I have quoted. Feld’s Kaluli pinpoint and imitate the sound of a particular bird within the complex rainforest soundscape; Turino’s Aymara listen for consonance of pitch in their group performances; and Rice’s Bulgarian listeners are acutely aware of whether or not a performance has the true *gaida* sound.

Reflecting on the transformational moment of non-verbal musical understanding when he “found ‘*gaida*’ player’s fingers”, Timothy Rice writes that, while previously he had been influenced by cognitive anthropology’s theory of culture as “mental activity” (2008: 50), subsequently, he embraced a hermeneutic phenomenology, in which “understanding ... precedes explanation rather than being the product of it” (2008: 56). This formulation provides a model for the use of receptive listening in experiencing musical performance in the field and analytical listening in transcribing and analysing fieldwork recordings, as exemplified in the works quoted here. Or perhaps a better model can be found in the deep listening techniques fostered by the poet of sound, Pauline Oliveros: expanding and contracting our listening, toggling between the focal and the receptive, between the hard work of identifying specific sounds and an open, immersive and global awareness.

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Endnotes

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1. Jim Drobnick (2004:10) coined the term “sonic turn” for “the increasing significance of the acoustic as simultaneously a site for analysis, a medium for aesthetic engagement, and a model for theorization”. Other useful collections of essays include Bull and Back (2003); Erlmann (2004); and Pinch and Bijsterveld (2012). The breadth of the field of study is evident in the constellation of terms used, each marking out a particular set of relationships among sound, hearing and listening. Apart from Drobnick’s “aural cultures”, authors refer to “auditory cultures” (Bull & Back 2003), “hearing cultures” and “sonic practices” (Erlmann2004), “sonic experience” (Augoyard and Thibaud 2005), “acoustic territories” (LaBelle 2010), “resonance” (Toop 2010) and “sonic culture” (Sterne 2012), as well as the all-purpose “sound studies”.
 2. In Husserl’s phenomenology this process of identifying and setting aside “commonsense” values and attitudes is termed the *epoché*. Since the 1980s, this preliminary practice has informed research in disciplines deriving from phenomenology, including anthropology and ethnomusicology.
 3. These and other theories of listening are canvassed in *Educational Theory* 61 (2) (2011).
 4. Plato and Aristotle agree that education in music builds moral character and cultivates the mind. See Aristotle (1932: VIII, ch. 5) and Plato (1955). While both philosophers regard music in excess as dangerous, Plato sees it as potentially threatening the entire moral and social world. See Aristotle (1985: 17–18) and Plato (2014b).
 5. For example, when we interview our musical collaborators in the field, do we also encourage them to question us? Do we allow that they may dispute our entitlement to raise questions with them or the propriety of doing so? (Corradi Fiumara 1990)
 6. Perhaps the most influential aural history is Alain Corbin’s *Village Bells* (1988), an investigation of how bell-ringing practices in nineteenth-century French villages enacted the complex relations between cultural continuities and the power structures of the emerging nation-state.
 7. Biddle also mentions less focused modes of listening to music. Kassabian’s (2013) *ubiquitous listening* resembles the *distracted listening* associated with sound technologies that linger in the auditory background and to which we tune in and out. DeNora (2000), Toop (2010) and LaBelle (2010) discuss related modes of *everyday listening*, while Clarke and Kini (2011) provide an insightful introduction to *meditative listening* practices in relation to North Indian classical music.
 8. Copies of the *Bringing It All Back Home* video are now difficult to locate (NUIG library has one) but a video of traditional flute player Matt Molloy playing a hornpipe in his flowing style, in contrast with classical flautist James Galway, whose playing on the tin whistle follows a more sharply defined rhythm, tells a similar story (Molloy 1977).
 9. *Centre de recherché sur l’espace sonore et l’environnement urbain* at the National School of Architecture of Grenoble.
 10. Music of a different southern Andean pitu ensemble can be heard on *Mountain Music of Peru* (1994: 2/25).
 11. Timothy Rice’s mentor Kostadin Varimezov and his son Ivan Varimezov can be heard in Varimezov (undated).

