

## Ways of Listening

Warren Burt, 2009

"Yer stuffed. Not 'cause you're wrong, but 'cause you're looking in the wrong direction." -Chris Mann, "The Rationales" 1986

This quote from the Australian poet and composer Chris Mann sums up a crucial problem in perception - the ability to ask the right question. In the sciences and mathematics, it has long been known that the ability to the right question is as important as the ability to solve problems. Similarly, it has long seemed to me that in listening, it's as important to be able to listen "in the right direction," that is, to concentrate one's attention in the right way for the given circumstances, as it is to be able to distinguish the various sonic objects one is listening to.

I've noticed negative reactions to various sounding things, and often, it has occurred to me that the negative reaction was caused by the person wrongly applying a set of rules or expectations to a particular sound. That is, of all the ways of listening there are, the wrong one was chosen (consciously or unconsciously) for that sound.

This led me to wonder - how many ways of listening - how many ways of concentrating the attention on sound - could I list? In a 1981 essay "Musical Perception and Exploratory Music" (published in *Art and Text* Nr. 5, Melbourne), I speculated that the brain divided incoming sound into three categories: music, language, and environmental sound, and said that many of the musics which most interested me were those that lived "between the categories." While still accepting this broad-brush categorization of sound by the brain, I now think that, in fact, there are probably a number of other ways the brain deals with sound, and here I wish to enumerate some ways of listening that may cut across these divisions, as well as ways of listening that may be specific to only one kind of sound.

### WAYS OF LISTENING - AN INCOMPLETE CATALOG

1) Tibetan Buddhist Listening Meditation. Starting, perhaps, from "listening degree zero," this way of listening is one of the most esoteric. It is described by the late Lobsang Phuntsok Lhalungpa as "becoming listening itself." (in the book "Sacred Tradition and Present Need" Jacob Needleman, ed. Esalen Institute - Viking, 1975). In this meditation, one tries to become as clear a vessel for listening as possible. One tries to switch off all verbal labels for sound, and all emotional reactions to them, simply being aware of each sound as it occurs. It's a very difficult exercise for some, and some even vehemently oppose it, saying that turning off one's emotional reactions, even temporarily, even for the purpose of an exercise, is to deny one's basic humanity. Quite simply, I feel these objectors are wrong. Being able to understand one's emotional reactions, and move with and beyond them is one of the essences of meditative technique. And if one can approach sound in this way, within the controlled space of meditation, one can gain a new appreciation of sound in its functioning, and its effect on our consciousness. When the American composer John Cage talks about "letting sounds be themselves," I feel he's talking about this kind of listening, and in fact, I find that listening in this way to many of his pieces, from the quiet sparse world of his "String Quartet in Four Parts" to the crowded, noisy worlds of "Cartridge Music" and "HPSCHD" allows them to really come alive.

2) Scientific Listening. This is an outward directed, labelling-oriented kind of listening. Every bird-"watcher" does this. On a recent Australian tv show, an ornithologist said "80% of bird-watching is done with the ears. It should be called "bird-listening," and anyone who has observed birds knows

this well. To understand the source of each sound, and how that sound works, and the contexts it fits into, is the aim of this kind of listening.

3) "Reduced Listening." This term was coined by the French composer and music technology pioneer Pierre Schaeffer. It means listening to the technical qualities of each sound, regardless of its origin and regardless of its emotional meaning or implication. When I've been teaching young recording engineers, teaching this skill has often been a crucial part of the training. To take just one example from their work with commercial music - it's only when they can temporarily ignore the funk, and the groove, of, say, a particular bass line, and become aware of what frequencies the bass is made of, and how those frequencies come in and out (the sound's envelope), that they can begin to shape the sound effectively, so that the sound can have more "bite" and fit into a mix well. Once they can do that, they have learned the means by which that bass line can have its funk and groove enhanced. This kind of listening is essential when one is learning about treating sound - filtering, equalizing, granulating, stretching, transposing, etc.

4) Defensive listening. This is a kind of listening that mostly occurs outside of the world of the recording studio - it's essential for survival in the "real world." To take an archaic example (archaic everywhere except in rural southern Africa today, or in zoos, that is), hearing the lion's roar behind you, or even more critically, the soft sound of a lion's paws padding behind you (!) is an essential survival skill! In more urban societies - the ability to hear a motor vehicle, and avoid it, is an example of this kind of listening.

5) Semiotic listening. This is a kind of listening that is being developed more and more in our highly equipment mediated society. A quick and practical example - hearing the ring tone of my cell phone from among all the others. A more elaborate example - the "Bellenorgel" or Bell Organ, of the Belgian composer Godfried-Willem Raes. This is a device, built in the early 70s ([www.logosfoundation.org](http://www.logosfoundation.org)) in which doorbells, telephone bells, and sonic warning devices of various kinds were mounted on a large wooden board, the devices set to be played automatically, in unpredictable rhythms, controlled by a series of surplus telephone relay switches. Although it sounds like fun in theory, in practice the device proved extremely annoying to listen to. This was evident almost immediately upon its being turned on. As Raes explained, the problem was that all the devices were warning devices - each one indicating if not danger, at least the presence of the unknown. Who IS at the door, on the phone? Friend or foe? Good news or bad? And so, even with the best will in the world, listening to this device, made exclusively of sonic warning devices, in almost any other way, proved extremely difficult, if not impossible.

6) Analytic listening - and a subset: Harmonic listening. This aspect of listening is concentrated almost wholly on music, although it can be heard elsewhere. It involves concentrating on aspects of the sounds of music and their interrelationships. In Western Classical music, this might involve the ability to name and label certain combinations of sounds - chords - and say how they fit into the overall progression of sounds. In Indian Classical music, it might involve the ability to identify correctly the tones and glides of a given raga, and being able to tell if the performer is using them correctly or not. Other music-related analytical skills would involve being able to identify and transcribe rhythms, identify tone-colors and instrumental techniques, analyze how an electronic sound was made, etc..

7) Deep Listening. This is a technique developed by composer Pauline Oliveros and taught by her. Mastery of it takes considerable work, but basically it involves being aware of all sounds coming from all directions at all times. It's related to the Tibetan Buddhist Listening Meditation, but goes in many other directions from there. For more information on this, consult the Deep Listening website

([www.deeplisting.org](http://www.deeplisting.org)).

8) Directed, composed listening. The only example I know of this is American composer David Dunn's composition, "Purposeful Listening in Complex States of Time." (1997-98) This is a composition for listeners - fully notated, with an elaborate notation that has to be learned before it can be performed properly. The instructions tell the listener what kind of sound to listen for, in a particular direction, at a particular time. So, for example, one might be told to listen for a sound at "sky level" to the right, and close to the listener's body for a very brief time, followed by listening to a moderately distant sound at "body level" to the lower right for a slightly longer period of time, followed by....If one thought that the Tibetan listening exercise was difficult, this is a virtuoso exercise in consciousness control. I've made it through a page or two of this score, but never have been able to do more than that. Still, from the small amounts I've done, I can already tell that this is one of the most powerful consciousness training, and consciousness altering exercises in sound I've ever experienced. (The link to this essay on David's own website (<http://www.daviddunn.com/~david/>) is broken, so he's kindly allowed me to make this score available on this website. You can download it [here](#).)

9) Normal "musical" listening. This is where a member of a culture listens to music from that culture without concentrating on it too hard, or trying to analyze it in any conscious way. The rules of the music may vary from culture to culture (the harmony of jazz, for example, as different from the concentration on melody in classical Persian music), and there may be certain musical "universals" that do not vary from culture to culture (the frequency range of sounds considered "musical," the range of musical speeds considered "rhythmic," etc.), but this kind of listening is extremely prevalent, and is usually "culture-specific." That is, the listeners have consciously or unconsciously absorbed the rules of their own music, and listen to that music with the template of those rules (mostly unconsciously) in their minds. It can be very aware, as in concentrating on a piece of music you admire, or it can be a background activity, as in having music on in the background while you read.

10) Cinematic listening. How we sink into the conventions of the normal narrative film soundtrack, and how we relate the sound to what is happening on the screen is the focus of this kind of listening. French critic and composer Michel Chion has written at length about this, as have a number of others. This kind of listening, paradoxically, can also operate in the radio play, even though there are no physical pictures present on radio. (More information on Michel Chion and his work can be found at <http://www.michelchion.com/v1/>.)

11) Ironic, distanced listening. This might best be explained with a verbal example. When one tells a sick joke, one listener might laugh, while another will be repelled by the grotesque or violent imagery. The person who laughs has the ability to hear the language used in a distanced manner - not being viscerally affected by the imagery used. The person who is repelled feels, at least inwardly, the violence or grotesquerie of the imagery in such a way that they are unable to appreciate the humor in the situation. In musique concrete, or sound art, this way of listening can also be called for. The section at the beginning of Trevor Wishart's "Red Bird" (1977-78) which sounds like a political prisoner is being beaten up, while what is actually happening is a collage of books being slammed shut, is a good example of this. ("Redbird" is available as a CD. <http://www.trevorwishart.co.uk> for more information.)

12) Practical, purposive verbal listening. Listening to verbal instructions so that one knows precisely what to do, and how to do it. A variant on language listening which is concentrated on learning specific things.

13) Wholistic linguistic listening. This is where one listens to language, but is aware not only of the words and their meanings, but also of tone of voice, inflection, accent, "word-sound," vowel quality, and many other aspects of utterance which give verbal language its overall "meaning." With this kind of listening, for example, one can (hopefully) tell when someone is lying.

14) Paranoiac / critical listening. I adopt this term from the Surrealists for my own ends. In this kind of listening - mostly to language, but again, it can be applied to other forms of sound - one continuously monitors the content of language for political / social content one agrees / disagrees with. Sometimes this is involuntary, as when one winces at a particularly obnoxious sexist comment, and sometimes it's done continually and consciously, as when an editor monitors a text being prepared for broadcast.

15) Internal listening. When you hear a tune "in your head," and that sound is not physically present. If a tune continually repeats in your head, that's called an "ear-worm." If you hear original music in your head, and have the ability to write it down, that's one way of composing. If you hear voices in your head, and they're telling you the future of the world, and how to achieve it, that's called either being a prophet, or being schizophrenic. St Theresa of Avila has some amazing descriptions of sounds and voices in her head, which commanded her to write her works. An interesting contemporary consideration of this phenomenon can be found at <http://www.intervoiceonline.org/2009/10/9/lessons-on-voices-from-st-john-of-the-cross-by-dr-simon-jones>.

16) Dream listening. When sounds from the external world are transformed in the dream state. I had a lovely example of this happen to me recently. I was in Melbourne, staying in a hotel on a busy street which had a tram line on it. It was hot, and I was sleeping with the window open. In my dream, I was hearing an orchestral piece with very deep basses playing a drone which grew in strength. Then, a cluster of high flutes came in, sustained and insistent. Then I woke up, and my dream symphony seamlessly morphed into what caused it - the sound of a tram going by. There are many forms of dream listening, but this particular one fascinates me greatly.

#### SOME THOUGHTS:

I wrote the above list fairly quickly. I'm sure there are many other kinds of listening, and hopefully, this will stimulate others to come up with types of their own. It should be pointed out that not all of the above listening states are voluntary. We are hard-wired for some of these states in order to survive. Defensive listening and semiotic listening usually trump all the others, and thank goodness they do. The person who is so obsessed with the music playing in their head that they fail to hear the truck bearing down on them will not be passing their genes (or memes!) on into the gene (or meme) pool. And, obviously, several of these states of consciousness, for that is what each of these listening states are, can be occurring at once. Some of these states, such as the Tibetan listening meditation, or the Dunn composition, are will-directed, and some clearly aren't.

In "normal" life, for example, defensive listening and semiotic listening are (hopefully) always percolating away in the background, being able to be called into use at a moment's notice. In fact, we've constructed safe environments where one can allow these states of listening to be put aside, or at least put very far into the background. These are called, in our culture, "concert halls" and "theatres."

One can compose for these states, and one can compose with these states. Some of these states have situations where we naturally do them, and some don't - we need to create situations for them - this can be as simple as taking the time to do them. For example, coming across a waterfall, one might decide

to stop thinking about that conversation one had yesterday in order to concentrate solely on the sound of the waterfall for a while. We are often doing more than one kind of listening at one time.

For music listening, there is often the question of which state to listen to a given work with. Intolerance can often result from applying the wrong listening template to a given work. A trivial example of this might be the conservative Western musician who insists that all activities involving the use of acoustic musical instruments, from whatever culture, be heard in terms of European traditional (1550-1950) harmony.

And some states may produce more therapeutic results than others. Some of the meditative listening states can be quite calming, while some of the others, such as the focussed, label-oriented scientific listening, produce other very valuable kinds of knowledges. For example, composer David Dunn may be fascinated, sonically, by the sounds of beetles inside the bark of trees that he records with his specially built contact microphones. But when he listens to those sounds in a labelling oriented manner, he finds out things about the behaviour of those insects that have been previously unknown to science, and that knowledge might be applied to controlling destructive results of those insects. A report on his recent work in this field can be found at <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/201001/beetles-music>.

At this point, I don't want to make value judgments about the various states of listening, other than to point to particular conditions in which some might be more appropriate than others. But I would like to identify the various states in an attempt to show how the metaphorical fugue of our consciousness works on several levels at once, and how one can, given the right conditions, direct and guide that consciousness in order to enhance the experience of our listenings to the world.