
Listening to the Listening

Author: Hildegard Westerkamp

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Much as technology can annoy and frustrate me and much as the environments in which sound studios exist tend to be unhealthy, it works better for me than composing for instruments. I use technology in my work because it is the best tool for me to express what I want to say through composition. As well, the sound studio allows for immediate interaction with sound, an intimacy, a conversation, like a slow motion improv. In a sound studio one can be a musician and composer at the same time.

But I also perceive sound technology as a dangerous tool for composition: it can distract endlessly from the content of what we want to say; it can demand an inordinate amount of attention to technical detail and it can also distract our audiences from really hearing our work. But no matter how much technology we put between our composing selves and our final composition, between ourselves and our audiences, it is still ears and bodies and psyches that perceive our pieces.

That is all I have to say about technology today.

I will probably say more about gender.

Most likely my way of speaking and your ways of listening to me will reveal more than my actual words about my inner stance towards technology and gender. So, perhaps one could say that the listening that occurs in this room today creates the real meanings. The quality of our listening can change the quality of a speaker's or a musician's presentation, the quality of a musical composition and yes, even the quality of the soundscape itself.

There is a complex and mysterious place between a sound and the listener's experience of it. A sound occurs. And is heard. But by which person? From which culture? In what mental state? What physical state? What psychic space? With what intellectual knowledge? Which past experiences? What age? From which gender? And so on.

There may indeed be differences in how men and women process what they hear. And cultural differences may also have a direct influence on gender perception. One might argue that some cultures have a more dominant masculine presence than others. But as I shy away from any generalizations about perception and gender, let me put it another way: there might be differences between how the feminine in us processes what we hear and how the masculine in us does it.

This is not a simplistic argument about differences in male and female perception. It is a deep sensing of those differences, not just between the sexes but within each of us, depending on whether we allow the feminine or the masculine (what Carl Jung called the anima and animus) in us to be dominant, or whether we can find some kind of balance between them.

I understand this talk to be a space in time, an opportunity given to us to perceive these differences; to accept them for the moment and to explore the vast resources of creativity

and thought they give to all of us if we acknowledge the existence of both the feminine and masculine within each of us and each of the world's cultures. Consider what Jung said: "Just as the anima becomes, through integration, the Eros of consciousness, so the animus becomes the Logos; and in the same way that the anima gives relationship and relatedness to a man's consciousness, the animus gives woman's consciousness a capacity for reflection, deliberation, and self-knowledge."

There is nothing simple about this subject matter. Let me return to that field of perception between the sound and the listener's experience of it: I would like to compare that field to the shape of a large ear. Earlier I called it a complex and mysterious place. The ear itself is perhaps one of the most complex and mysterious containers for one of our senses. There is nothing simple about its shape. Imagine exchanging ears with your neighbour, in other words changing the shape of your own sound receptacle. Since we cannot look at our own ears I would like to suggest that you look at someone else's ears and compare them to yet someone else's. The differences in our ears' contours as well as the details in the contours will affect the way in which we gather sound into our ear canal. You can perceive how someone else may hear differently if you tug and tear at your ear and try to alter its shape. Try it right now while I am speaking, listen carefully at the same time and note the differences. They are subtle, but they are there and are especially audible in the high frequency range. And high frequencies are important as they give articulation to speech and orient us in space.

If these differences in external shape alter how we perceive the world around us, then think of the differences that continue inside your body, your ear canal, the eardrum, the middle ear, the bones, the inner ear, the transmission from there into the brain, and on and on. We have only talked about the physical characteristics of our hearing perception. What about the psychic field?

Let me say it again: there is a complex psychic field between the listening person and the perceived sound. In this field, emotions, experiences, thoughts, all converge together and influence our listening. Imagine the multitude of possibilities: in how many ways can a sonic situation be perceived depending on the different psychic states present? Or vice versa, how can a sonic situation alter our psychic state.

I would like to play you a tape that was made by Joan Henderson and Ann Holmes in 1977 as part of our radio program "Soundwalking" on Vancouver Co-operative Radio. They were interviewing people about the O Canada Horn at the corner of Robson and Burrard in downtown Vancouver from 10 minutes before noon to 10 minutes after noon. At that time, the horn blasted every day at noon from the top of the BC Hydro building, three blocks away from the interviewers' location at an ear splitting 108 decibels. I will play you a short excerpt where the interviewers speak to a young woman just before noon, then the horn blows and causes a strong transformation in the woman's attitude and perception towards the sound and the whole situation. It is an example that may illustrate in concrete terms what I mean by that complex and mysterious field between a sound and the listener's perception of it.

TAPE EXAMPLE: EXCERPT, O CANADA HORN (5'20") not available yet on-line.

Transcription for Printed Text:

JOAN: Excuse me, have you ever heard the whistle that goes off at noon?

WOMAN: Yeah.

JOAN: What do you think of it?

WOMAN: (long silence, then short disdainful chuckle), Well, uhm, I think it is a little bit deceptive, you know because this is, uhm, some people think it comes from a church. I don't know whether you are talking about the whistle or the bells.

JOAN: The whistle. Where does the whistle come from?

WOMAN: Well, from B.C Hydro, as far as I know, yeah.

JOAN: So, you don't like the fact that people don't know where it is coming from?

WOMAN: Yeah, partially, you know, because it's -- (sigh), you know, I think it is romanticised a bit, you know, and people are, you know, like they, you know, they think, oh jee that's really neat, it's part of Vancouver but, you know, like I don't think much of B.C. Hydro (chuckle). No.

JOAN: You could do without the whistle.?

WOMAN: Uhm, I personally could do without it, but I know society couldn't, you know, because I am very knowledgeable on solar energy. And I have some land, so I don't have to be here. I am here, making more money right now. But, I mean you couldn't pack in B.C. Hydro all of a sudden. It's>unfortunate they are as powerful as they are.

JOAN: What about the whistle, though? Can we pack in the whistle?

WOMAN: (long silence, helpless laugh), You know, I don't know, is that a very important question?

JOAN: I just wondered what the whistle means to you.

WOMAN: What does it mean to you two? I'd like to know. You are obviously spending some good energy here on this corner. Why?

JOAN: Well, I think it is important as a sound signal, it indicates a certain time of the day. For some people, veterans for instance, that we talked to, they like it because it reminds them that they are in Canada and they like it because it is a soundmark of Vancouver --

WOMAN: (Aghast) Jesus, you are kidding.

JOAN: And there are some people who really don't like it.

WOMAN: Well, if you and I walked out this morning and we didn't have watches on, and we didn't see any clocks and we didn't hear the whistle, it wouldn't take too much for you and I to guess about what time it was right now. And I think, what it does, it makes people less aware. I don't know what you are looking for, you know, why you are here, you know.

ANN:Most importantly we are here to find out what other people think. (siren in background) Here it comes. I personally don't have an opinion. We just decided to do something on it, something to do, you know, it is a big sound, see what people think about it.

WOMAN: Well, that whistle that you heard right now that's the construction site in the middle there, that's not the whistle you are talking about.

JOAN: No.

ANN: But this should be coming up, I guess, now.

WOMAN: (laughs) You don't even know what it sounds like yourselves, you guys! --- You know, it doesn't bother me, but I don't think it's necessary. It's part of Vancouver. But I can think of a lot of other things that are far more important. You know, you should be asking people, what do they think about the spot down at Stanley Park, you know, that's going to be taken over by big business people, you know, what do you think about --

ANN: Where's that?

WOMAN: --the library that throws away thousands of books and won't give away any for free, you know, and what do you think about the Salvation Army that's getting thousands of dollars worth of goods and are selling them off to the antique dealers under the table, really upping the prices in the small market, you know, that's really a lot more important to me.

JOAN: Yeah, well may be ---

ANN: (overlapping with Joan) what other things? Really, that's interesting. WOMAN: (chuckles) you are talking to someone pretty socially conscious, you know, uhm---

HORN BLASTS LOUDLY AND POWERFULLY FROM B.C. HYDRO BUILDING, playing the first three notes of 'O Canada'.

WOMAN: (astonished gasp, shaky voice) That's-- that's pretty weird, uhm-- I've lived in the city for 24 years---

JOAN: And?

WOMAN: (tries to talk, but only short sobs come out)

ANN: (laughs unabashedly) and you have never heard it like that, huh?

WOMAN: (very shaky voice) No, I have heard it like --- oh wow (can't stop her sobs), it's so weird (silence, then she forces herself to say) I have heard it like that a lot.

JOAN: What's happening?

WOMAN: (another long silence) well (clears her throat)--

JOAN: What's happening with you?

WOMAN: It's kind of hard to talk right now --- wow (long silence) well, like I have always really, really loved this city and in the past three or four years, since I came back from England, they had torn all of Granville Street down, places like the York Theatre, all the Westend, where all the old houses were--- (breathes with effort, still crying), oh phew (silence again, she sniffs), and me personally I have been really sad (sniffs, silence), and uhm, that fog horn reminds me of a time when the noisyness of the city wasn't so big. You could actually hear the boats down in the harbour (voice gets very shaky), but you can't hear that anymore (cries quietly), phew (tries to chuckle about herself).

JOAN: Thanks a lot. You want us to let you go now?

WOMAN: I am sorry --- (in a teary voice) I really love this city, but I -- I just take everything back, you know. like, what you are saying, it is pretty important what you are doing.

JOAN: Great, thanks a lot for talking with us.

End of transcript

The woman's attitude switches from a wall of defense and aggressiveness, - i.e. what you are doing is bullshit, a waste of time, meaningless - to an exposure of her deep vulnerability. The sound of the horn literally hits her, penetrates her armour. Like a lightening bolt it saps her with the sudden realisation that perhaps there is meaning in this afterall. She becomes thoughtful and reflective and her sobs and tears give a sense that not all is well for her on this day. Her sadness is enormous. She had armoured her psychic playing field with weapons on that day - and this is audible in her tense voice - and when the horn blows, its sound power crushes her weapons. What's left is a field of tears and new recognition.

Let's just spend some time right now travelling through some different psychic states that may influence our perception of any sonic situation in a similar fashion.

How do you think your listening is influenced when you are

nervous
 or impatient
 happy
 tired
 animated
 when you are content
 when you are feeling hopeless
 relaxed
 defeated
 inspired
 worried
 anxious
 when you are out to criticize
 when nothing satisfies you
 when you are angry
 when you are in love
 feel generous
 hopeful
 warm
 despairing
 when you feel a love for life
 when you feel defensive
 competitive
 when you are sad
 or when you are full of energy.

There is a complex and mysterious place between a sound and the listener's experience of it. A quiet place perhaps, or a noisy one. Perhaps a psychic playing field, where anything can happen. Isn't it the place where the feminine within each of us or within a whole culture receives sonic events differently than the masculine? How on earth can these differences be defined in words? And can they be distinguished from other ones (physical, technological, social, religious, political, environmental, etc.)? Or shall we pay attention to the playing field itself - like we did today - listening to our ways of listening?

