
To Listen is to Relate is to Sustain¹

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The following article was presented at Hlustið Vel (Listen Well), a seminar hosted by the Centre for Research in Music / Rannsóknastofa í tónlist (CRiM/RÍT) and Dark Music Days on January 28, 2024.

Midway through her keynote speech for the conference Improvisation Across Borders in 1999, Pauline Oliveros listed the abilities she would like installed on her imagined future cyber-implant – her “musician chip.”

On my musician chip I would like the... Ability to perceive and comprehend inter-dimensional spatiality... Ability to perceive and comprehend the spiritual connection and interdependence of all beings and all creation as the basis and privilege of music making.... Ability to create community and healing through music making...²

Twenty-five years beyond this keynote and after Oliveros passed, her beautiful thinking resonates with urgent relational issues pertinent to our glocal being. Oliveros advocated for listening as relations – to oneself, to one’s collaborators or community, to the space in which one exists. Her practice in the 1960s was to “[l]isten to everything all the time and remind yourself when you’re not listening”³. In 2024, Oliveros’ scores and Deep Listening praxis transfer this advocacy to incoming generations of creative practitioners who face countless known and unknown precarious nows.

Deaf artist Christine Sun Kim’s work is primarily focused on sound, and has included a Manhattan soundwalk called *Listen* that adapted Max Neuhaus’s own soundwalk from fifty years earlier⁴ to Kim’s speculative contexts of listening beyond what can be heard. Kim’s scores and happenings follow in Oliveros’ weirding of sonic attention/intention. In *Listen*, Kim asks, “What is the sound of arms moving? Or of rats gossiping? What about the sound of slight anticipation, or the sound of memories?”⁵ *Flash Art’s* “Listening In” columnist Jessica Holmes describes Kim’s scores as weirding “the prestige of hearing in music through

¹ The title of this talk owes a debt to Berglind María Tómasdóttir whose essay “To perform is to compose is to listen – empowering the performer” informs its syntax.

² Oliveros 1999

³ Weintraub 2023

⁴ Voon 2016

⁵ Holmes 2020

multisensory attentiveness, ...where viewing is feeling is listening and so on"⁶. This description dovetails with Oliveros' own experiments while studying at University of California – San Diego in using movement and material placements – vis-a-vis theatre and visual artworks – to *feel* the sound.⁷

Within the context of deaf education, percussionist Dame Evelyn Glennie describes her capacity to hear pitches in her percussion mallets by where they resonate or vibrate in her fingers, hands, wrists, arms.⁸ Glennie's description positions listening not only as an action of hearing-normative bodies; instead, listening is a sense of soundwave touching *through* the body. Our torsos and extremities act as resonating chambers, and we listen via felt sense or corporeal vibration, listening to self, cultivating a New Materialist practice of self-listening.

Performing arts studies likewise invests in cultivating how we listen to others by emphasising embodiment and relationality. Artist researcher Fiona Templeton defined "[t]heatre [a]s the art of relationship"⁹. As creators of the Viewpoints framework for physical theatre, Anne Bogart and Tina Landau extend this notion to the role of listening in an embodiment/relationality praxis.

*To work effectively in the theater, a field that demands intense collaboration, the ability to listen is the defining ingredient. And yet, it is very difficult to listen – to really listen... We learn to listen with the whole body, with the entire being.... Extraordinary listening means listening with the whole body without an idea of the result.*¹⁰

TO SURVIVE IS TO SUSTAIN IS TO SURVIVE

In the documentary *Deep Listening: The Story of Pauline Oliveros*, Oliveros posits in an interview that "Listening... is about focus, noticing, expanding"¹¹. Witnessing, *withnessing*. To survive, to sustain, to survive – I draw on Templeton's theatre definition for my neologism *withness*: the art of interdependent relationship.

Oliveros' musician-chip abilities, outlined at the start of this talk, provide a maquette for a *withness* listening practice suitable within sustainability pedagogy:

*"Ability to perceive and comprehend the... interdependence of all beings... to sound and perceive... the universe much as whales sound and perceive... the oceans.*¹²

Much of Oliveros' work in their now has paved the way for, has proven prescient, has strong resonance with Posthumanism and New Materialisms theories of the 21st century – where

⁶ Holmes 2020

⁷ Weintraub 2023

⁸ Glennie 2003

⁹ Templeton 1990

¹⁰ Bogart and Landau 2004

¹¹ Weintraub 2023

¹² Oliveros 1999

listening as a practice for coming into relationship with the more-than-human has entered academic discourse. Posthumanist scholar Donna Haraway describes such relationship formation as “[b]ecoming-with, not becoming...; becoming-with is how partners are, in Vinciane Despret’s terms, rendered capable”.¹³

Such interdependence is not new; indeed, it’s at the heart of much Indigenous social structure and practice, to which Posthumanist and New Materialist scholars owe citation. As an example, Indigenous scholar and bryologist Robin Wall Kimmerer describes her experience with an ecocentric ethos

*[i]n traditional indigenous communities, (where) learning takes a form very different from that in the American public education system. Children learn by watching, by listening, and by experience. They are expected to learn from all members of the community, human and non.*¹⁴

To become response-able is to cultivate a relationship where listening is activated. For Kimmerer, she asserts the felt sense of her research in bryology (the study of moss): “Learning to see mosses is more like listening than looking”.¹⁵

And, somehow, learning to hear ecosystems is more like tearing paper. To wit: Listaháskóli’s Skerpla performed the text-score “Papericity” by Oliveros¹⁶ this past Friday at Dark Music Days, with more than ten performers exploring sound production through folding, tearing, dragging, blowing, and crumpling paper. The performers appeared fixated on their individuated paper-listening/sounding, with the variety of sounds producing a complex soundscape that resisted conventional audience-as-listener decoding through recognisable rhythm, melody, or narrative. And yet, as I listened, the individuated sounds appeared to carve their own spaces within the overall sonic spectrum. I was immediately reminded of soundscape ecologist Bernie Krause’s Acoustic Niche Hypothesis, where “animals evolved species-specific sounds in certain frequency bands and temporal patterns to minimize competition (i.e., masking) with sounds from other animals and the environment.”¹⁷

Oliveros’ maxim “Listening is survival”¹⁸ resonates in the necessity of activating non-normative listening practices that will help response-abilities in the wake of mass migration and displacement due to political terror, the climate crisis, and biodiversity loss. As an example, through the pandemic, many humans listened differently to their surroundings due to quarantines and curfews. People detected an increase of bird calls in their ecosystems¹⁹ in a way they hadn’t when human-produced sounds filled sound frequencies with their louder decibels and constancy. The pandemic activated listening, cultivating the initial blush of human-bird relationship. How does one sustain this relationship when avian populations and biodiversity suffer extraordinary losses?

¹³ Haraway 2016

¹⁴ Kimmerer 2003

¹⁵ Kimmerer 2003

¹⁶ Oliveros 2013

¹⁷ Krause 1993; Schoeman et al. 2022

¹⁸ Oliveros 2005

¹⁹ Gordo et al. 2021

TO LISTEN IS TO SUSTAIN IS TO LISTEN

During her Wyandot Thanksgiving Address that opened the Anthropocene Research Day²⁰, Indigenous artist Catherine Tammaro posed the question: “What makes you want to listen to the Earth?” One might answer Tammaro’s question with politics, as exemplified in the Dutch art collective The Embassy of the North Sea. They situate the rights of nature as the *raison d’être* for their eco-listening practice through “an invitation to collectively listen to the North Sea and other ecosystems and recognise them as political, cultural, and legal players”.²¹

In their 2014 essay “*Weathering: Climate Change and the ‘Thick Time’ of Transcorporeality*,” hydrofeminist Astrida Neimanis and gender studies scholar Rachel Loewen Walker enter the definition discussion. “[W]e want to think carefully about the meaning of ‘new’ in a transcorporeal world”^{22,23} Such interrogation of ‘new’ challenges the modernist, avant-garde preoccupation with the word, linked to poet Ezra Pound whose (borrowed) maxim “Make it new” became a maxim of the 20th century movement. Oliveros likewise weirded the definitions of ‘new’ and ‘free’ through her questions in the previously mentioned keynote. “What in fact does happen when a creative musician makes new music? How can it be new or free? What is it free of? What could be new about it?” (Oliveros 1999). Neimanis and Walker’s transcorporeality implies an entangled, intertangled, porous ecosystem of bodies on which and in which humans exist. Especially in the context of acoustic assemblages (Gautier 2015), this transcorporeality insists on the multitemporal, the interspatial, and an ecocentric curiosity (or learning with, learning from, becoming with the more-than-human implicit in that transcorporeality). What could be new about new in this context?

My score “Deep Time Listening” advocates for a transcorporeal, geologic listening *beyond* a new and *beyond* a now, listening into imaginaries of deep time, speculative futures, and the many entities co-composing or comprising the sonic therein. The title, itself, combines Oliveros’ ‘deep listening’ with the geologic ‘deep time’—suitable in its cheekiness given the term ‘deep listening’ was coined while Oliveros and company were deep underground.²⁴

DEEP TIME LISTENING

Go outside and listen for what cannot be heard.

Go to a foreshore and listen for the benthic community beneath the sand, rock, or mud.

Listen for the ocean’s youth, whose story may echo in a periwinkle shell.

Go to a mountain and listen for orogeny.

Listen for the thoughts of a once-thriving ecosystem, of current ecosystem struggle, of future ecosystem resilience.

Go to a young forest and listen for the unfurling of Devonian ferns in early morning sun.

Go to a coniferous forest and listen for the first Permian pine cones to drop from tree to floor.

Go to the winter and listen for Ice Ages past, melting glaciers’ present, and the ghosts of glaciers future.

(Rawlings 2019)

²⁰ Anthropocene Research Day occurred in January 2024 as part of the multi-year research project “Bomb Pulse: Cultural and Philosophical Readings of Time Signatures in the Anthropocene.”

²¹ ‘Embassy of the North Sea’, n.d.

²² Neimanis and Walker 2014

²³ Shout-out to Bergþóra Ægisdóttir for drawing my attention to this quote.

²⁴ Weintraub 2023

The multiple, entangled temporalities of the more-than-human entities in “Deep Time Listening” reconfigure through the tension of speeds indicated in the terms deep time and sustainable futures.

With such layers, strings, knots, and many’s, who/how/when does any one – who is not one but multiple—sort through a definition for that many-timed many-spaced many-bodied ‘new’? Is what is unknown ‘new’? To or for whom? Is new not now but a speculative future? As a thought experiment, how might we listen to a virus, or to our gut microbiomes? On my musician chip, I would like the ability to listen to the interiority of ourselves – the many bodies housed in our bodies—in order to embrace, decolonise, or even transcend a dependence on corporeal individuation or a preoccupation with the ‘new.’ This listening may queer sonic conceptualisation of the temporal, the spatial. In response, and in response-ability²⁵, I propose: rather than make it new – make it known, make it now. Relate. Become-with. Kin it.

²⁵ Haraway 2016

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