

Layered Listenings: Lessons of the Land, Air and Sea

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LISTEN
as a bird in flight



FORM TWO GROUPS

Group 1.

Sits or lays down
creating earth chatter...
sounds of trees, trucks, insects,
parades, footsteps, and so on.

Group 2.

Walks around the space at
different speeds
periodically sounding moving
air
and winds.

Continue, listen, and remember.

I offer the graphic-text piece “As a Bird” as an example for embodied listening gatherings, as well as an opportunity for creative outpourings. It is purposely whimsical, to playfully break down barriers of musical “skill” within a group.

From such a playful atmosphere, participants can then focus on heightening awareness of sound and sense their environment. The following sections provide a context and suggestions on how to incorporate the piece into workshops or classes.

Background (or, How “As a Bird” Came to Be)

In the past ten years, my love of drawing, interest in text scores, experimentation, and “happenings” collided with my longstanding love of the environment and my concerns about politics of pollution. As a performance artist, themes of environmental concerns persistently surface as turbulent displays of concern or as urgings to encourage awareness. The work of composer Pauline Oliveros—specifically “Deep Listening”—propelled me to create what she refers to as “Sonic Meditations.” Oliveros coined the term “Deep Listening,” referring to the practice as “listening in every possible way to everything possible to hear no matter what one is doing.”¹ After working with her, receiving my teaching certificate in Deep Listening, and becoming the Director of the Center for Deep Listening, I find myself listening differently and embodying an increasingly heightened awareness to the environment.² “As a Bird” stands as a representation of how my worlds have collided and certainly also serves as a sonic meditation. Additionally, since I live with a bird, lessons of listening *as a bird* remains an everyday challenge.

As a performer and ethnomusicologist, I am fascinated by the senses as vehicles of the transmission of embodied knowledge.³ Listening, moving, and sensing the world around us, deeply, how might we understand where we are in time and locale? How might we effect change? How might we comprehend our presence in the world with other beings and things?

Listening Inside the Environment

If we listen to and from within our environment, what do we learn? How can we embody the knowledge? Listening within the environment can be done anywhere at any time and includes the rural, the metropolitan, and all the spaces in between. Listening within the environment involves listening to all vibrations,

1. See Pauline Oliveros, *Software for People: Collected Writings 1963-80* (1984; repr. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015); *Anthology of Text Scores* (Kingston: Deep Listening Publications, 2013); and *Deep Listening: A Composer’s Sound Practice* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2005).

2. My gratitude to Pauline Oliveros, Ione, and Heloise Gold for guiding me through the depths of Deep Listening and towards my certificate.

3. For example, see Tomie Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture through Japanese Dance* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007).

from dirt, rocks, trees, and water to people and the machines built by people. What does the land-air-and-sea-scape sound like? Since we exist as part of the soundscape, how do we observe from “within”? Most importantly, how might the environment inspire a musical piece?

First, feel free to use “As a Bird” in classes or workshops and to alter it for your settings. Make it your own. Here are a few suggestions for incorporating “As a Bird” into a group setting or a personal practice:

1) *Use “As a Bird” to initiate a workshop*

- a) I suggest participants view the text and then, when possible, to go for a walk or sit outside for 5-10 minutes and listen to the environment. Ask everyone to listen and imagine how each person might vocally (and percussively) represent the sonic environment. When an expedition outdoors is not feasible, sitting in silence for a few minutes to create and improvise an imaginary landscape works well.
- b) Once participants have re-assembled, find ways to create a playful, upbeat, yet focused setting. For example, I often ask students to stretch and walk around the room smiling broadly, even wildly, at each other. On paper such a suggestion appears strange! In my experience, in practice participants of all ages appreciate wriggling and smiling to break the “performance” tremors.
- c) Create two groups and perform “As a Bird.”
- d) Leave time after the session for silence and journal writing, followed by a discussion (preferably in a circle or in the setting of the piece).

2) *The history of notation: Why not use a text piece as the impetus to discuss the essential question: Why notate anything?*

- a) Basic questions: Why do people notate music? Historically, how and why have notational systems changed? How do different styles of notation reveal what is culturally, socially, aesthetically, technically, or practically important?
- b) Does notation raise concerns about tradition, ownership, heritage, legacy, power, perpetuity, or fame? Why might these issues be significant or of value?
- c) An introduction of text pieces, graphical notation, and animated notation in the context of experimental music can easily supply a backdrop.
- d) How do scores reflect the values of a time and place? Reflect on the dynamics of prescriptive vs. descriptive (and subjective) representations of sound.⁴ How do various styles of notation reinforce or rupture notions of what “performance” might be (and performer-composer-audience relationships)?

4. See Charles Seeger, “Prescriptive and Descriptive Music Writing” in *Studies in Musicology, 1935-1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 168-181.

3) *Consider the relationship of “Nature” to music*

a) I find pondering the history of how sounds in the environment influence composers fascinating.⁵ How do composers represent sounds of nature in their music, both visually and sonically? For example, consider exploring early illuminated manuscripts that depict birds, animals, plants (not to mention the fantastic), Olivier Messiaen’s manuscripts, or the sounds of the environment reflected in Tuvan throat singing, Charles Ives, Chinese guqin and so on. There are numerous examples to generate a lively discussion.

In addition, the power of art to transform our experience of the world can range from subtle to dramatic. John Cage, in conversation with Joan Retallack, conveys how experiences of art—visual, dance, music—can transform the experience of everyday life. He tells a marvelous story of viewing Mark Tobey’s white painting in a gallery, and then afterwards pausing to look at the pavement beneath his feet quite differently.⁶

b) Ask students to present one or two historical examples of music inspired by nature. After the presentations, facilitate a discussion. The assignment could be a written one as well.

4) *Create text and/or graphic pieces*

a) Request that participants create their own text pieces for the purpose of awakening the senses—specifically a heightened awareness of sound in the environment. When teaching composition, music history, or music appreciation, consider examining the variety of historical and cultural practices of music notation.

b) Each piece needs a name.

c) Each piece needs to be performed and discussed, and then the composer given an opportunity to reflect and perhaps even make changes.

d) What topics arise if the group discusses form (structure, composition)?

Parting Dreams

I find that challenging participants to create text and/or graphical pieces involves them in the process of active listening and imagining. The activity not only hones awareness of sensory experiences in various environments, the act of performing the pieces essentially shapes the environment. The shaping occurs in a literal, sonic sense, but also socially, as the performance of the piece with

5. A comprehensive list of references documenting the influence of the environment on artistic works and research is outside the scope of this essay. However, for a variety of cases of experimental visual and sound works devoted to birds, insects, and nature, see *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* 27 (Winter 2013).

6. See John Cage and Joan Retallack, *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words, Art, Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 98-100.

other participants creates a mini eco-community. Connections between participants form through performance, a kind of sensory bonding that hopefully spirals out to other environments, other communities, and other spaces as lush sensory experiences. Group participatory activities and discussion encourages embodied wellbeing and a connectedness between individuals that resonates well beyond the classroom.