

Practical exercises.

On Parameters of Sensory Experience and the Improvement of Listening:

Listening cannot be measured by a single parameter. To make this easier to understand, let's look at another sense, the sense of touch. When you are touched by your lover, could we measure this by a single parameter, for example, pressure? Warmth? Frequency? Texture? This would be absurd, of course, because every touch is part of a whole complex of inter-communicating factors, a list far too long to even attempt to write. And if we were to seek to improve our experience of touch, we would have to look at more than one factor.

Likewise with listening. It is not simply about loud and soft, or "Yes, I heard that" and "No, I didn't hear that." Listening is embedded in us long before we are born, long before we have any sense of self. It is a primary mode of meeting the world, and meeting the world occurs in many, many dimensions.

Therefore, if we are inspired to explore and improve something so deep and fundamental, we have to look at the multi-dimensional and systemic qualities of our experience.

Here's a simple way to start, an exercise to explore the way that you listen to music:

1) Choose two short pieces of recorded music that you love, no longer than ten minutes each. Ideally these would be pieces of music—of any genre—with depth and texture, well-recorded, played by artists with whom you feel some connection. In other words, two pieces of music you wouldn't mind getting to know better.

2) Find a quiet space where you can listen undisturbed. The quality of sound reproduction is important; you will want to use decent quality speakers, etc.

3) Set aside time for a short daily listening practice.

Every day for a week, you listen to the first piece of music, just one time. Simple. Then you allow yourself a little time to consider your experience. If you like to write, you might even write something down after each session, for purposes of comparison. Save the second piece of music for later.

Each day, after listening, consider your experience from various perspectives. Here are some possibilities; please feel free to use your own questions!

Did my feeling tone change in the course of the listening?

My pulse? My breathing?

Is my response the same each time I hear the piece?

Was I moved, emotionally, by this music?

Was there a shape to being moved, a path or narrative to the flow of feelings?

Were there images that came up?

If so, what were they?

Do I see colours when I listen?

Do particular people, animals, times, places or events come to mind?

Where does my attention go when I listen?

Do I sometimes get bored and turn off my attention?

Do I sometimes look for a way to go further into the music?

Do I go where my enjoyment goes, or do I go where I think I ought to go?

Was I thinking while I was listening? About what?

Was I judging or analyzing the performance?

Was I judging myself? (“Am I doing this right?”)

Was I planning my day, or reviewing something that happened recently?

What was I doing *while* I was listening?

What were my hands doing, my eyes, my tongue?

Did my skeletal self-organization change in any way in the course of the session?

Did it make a difference how I was supported: standing, sitting, lying?

Did I move to the music? Did I dance?

Do the time of day, the quality of light, the temperature in the room,
appear to make a difference?

Where did the music appear to be located?

Was it outside of me or inside of me?

If outside of me, where was it coming from—speakers, walls, floor?

If inside, where inside?

What other sounds entered into my listening?

Were there external sounds, like street noises, ventilation, electronic hums?

Were there internal sounds: my own breathing or digestion, my heartbeat or circulation,
or maybe the humming of my own nervous system?

Did these other sounds disappear or change while I was listening?

Did they distract me? Did they form part of the whole experience?

4) At the end of the week, review the whole experience.

What, for you, are the qualities of an optimal listening experience?

If YOU were the musician, with qualities would you hope for in your ideal listener?

5) What could you change about your self-organization that would bring you more enjoyment in listening?

6) On the 8th day, organize yourself in your own optimal way, and play for yourself the second piece of music. Are you the same listener you were a week ago?