



The Magic of Music
Healing the Heart, Body & Soul

Are You Listening?

By Art Blevins

When listening to music, the tendency is to focus on the product, the music, as opposed to the actual process of listening. However, paying close attention to the process of listening can literally be transforming. And we can do this, not only in the context of music, but also by listening to everything and everyone we encounter in every moment of the day – whether listening to our favorite song, or a close loved one, or a stranger, or a bird, or even the sounds of the city. And did I really say that listening can be “transforming”? What does that even mean? And how does one get started doing this? This article on the topic of “deep listening” will tell you how! Read on.

What is “Deep Listening”?

Deep Listening involves listening in as many ways as possible to everything that can possibly be heard all of the time. Deep listening is exploring the relationships among any and all sounds whether natural or technological, intended or unintended, real, remembered or imaginary. Thought is included. Deep listening includes all sounds expanding the boundaries of perception. It explores the difference between the involuntary nature of hearing and the voluntary, selective nature of listening. It cultivates a heightened awareness of the sonic environment, both external and internal. [1]

In 1989, musician and music professor Pauline Oliveros coined the term “deep listening” to describe a practice of radical attentiveness. She describes it as “a practice that is intended to heighten and expand consciousness of sound in as many dimensions of awareness and attentional dynamics as humanly possible.” [2] Oliveros states “I differentiate to hear and to listen. To hear is the physical means that enables perception. To listen is to give attention to what is perceived both acoustically and psychologically.” [3] She points out that the ear hears, the brain listens, the body senses vibrations. [4]

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Hearing is involuntary and protects us from unseen dangers. Of course, we can hear without listening (i.e. unconsciousness), but we can also choose to listen outwardly or inwardly to the past, present or future (i.e. consciousness). Listening actively directs one's attention to what is heard, to the interaction of the relationships of sounds and modes of attention. We hear in order to listen. We listen in order to interpret our world and experience meaning. Our world is a complex matrix of vibrating energy, matter and air just as we are made of vibrations. Vibration connects us with all beings and connects us to all things interdependently. Deep Listening includes all sounds expanding the boundaries of perception. Deep Listening includes the environmental and atmospheric context of sound: a dripping tap, distant hums of machinery or vehicles, animals, birds, the rustle of wind in the trees. [5] With heightened listening ability one can detect the slightest differences in sounds. This enables acute voice recognition, echo detection, spatial location, etc. [6]

One of the key experiences that inspired Oliveros' exploration of Deep Listening occurred when she discovered the Fort Worden Cistern in Port Townsend, Washington. The huge underground space at one time held two million gallons of water, but in 1988 Oliveros and musicians Stuart Dempster and Panaiotis descended into the cistern with their instruments (accordion, trombone, didgeridoo, vocals) and started playing. And they recorded the result. The cistern has a 45-second reverberation time, and the recordings are defined by a surreal smearing of tones. [2] Inside that echoic chamber, their instruments bounced and reverberated the sound in a way they'd never experienced, changing the way they responded and listened. The echo itself had become another 'instrument' in their band, and this changed everything. [5] "The cistern space, in effect, is an instrument being played simultaneously by all three composers," Oliveros stated in the album's original liner notes. [2] The recording was released as an eponymous album, the trio calling themselves the Deep Listening Band, and they went on to release more music, change formation and collaborate with many musicians and artists over the years. [5]

Oliveros' work with deep listening was intended to facilitate creativity, deeper awareness, and a better understanding of oneself and others. She dedicated her life to the practice and teaching of deep listening, going on to trademark the term, write books, perform talks, hold workshops, retreats and create a dedicated institute which has evolved into the [Center for Deep Listening](#) at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. [5]

Listening can Transform Human Connections and Relationships

Oliveros's focus on listening to the totality of our acoustic environment not only applies when listening to music. It also extends to the important context of listening to other human beings. By digging deeper into listening she hoped "to create an atmosphere of opening for all to be heard, with the understanding that listening is healing." [7] This generous, lifelong commitment to listening was, perhaps, her most enduring contribution: approaching the world with ears wide open, with as much courage as one could muster, pausing when necessary, and listening deeply. And she described listening as a necessary pause before thoughtful action.

"I see and hear life as a grand improvisation - I stay open to the world of possibilities for interplay in the quantum field with self and others - community - society - the world - the universe and beyond." [6]

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Speaking on the topic of listening with the intent to help strengthen connections with others, Karyn Gagnon says in her TED Talk "Learning to Listen"...

"All of us have a need to connect. And we do that through listening because it touches every aspect of our lives. People yearn for others to listen to them. People simply want someone to be fully present when they have something to say. We gravitate to those who make the time for us. Listening is the foundation to meaningful relationships. And relationships are the key to growth. And growth results in the recognitions of other perspectives, which then ultimately fosters peace." [8]

Professional negotiator and mediator William Ury also speaks on the importance of listening as a vital part of communication and has more than 30 years of experience working with many individuals, including *world leaders*. His experience includes intervening in family feuds, boardroom battles, labor strikes and even civil wars. From his TED Talk on "The Power of Listening" he tells us...

"I hear a lot of talking, but I don't hear a lot of real listening. We think of negotiation as being about talking but in fact it's really about listening. Listening, I believe, is the missing half of communication - absolutely necessary, but often overlooked. Listening helps us connect with other human beings. It helps us build rapport. It builds trust. It shows we care. After all, everybody wants to be heard. Listening may be the golden key that opens the door to human relationship." [9]

He also emphasizes the longer lasting effects listening can have on others.

"Listening can be a chain reaction in which each person who is genuinely listened to feels naturally inspired to listen to the next. Listening can be contagious. And so, I invite you to start this chain reaction today, right here, right now. In your next conversation with a colleague, or a client, partner, or child, a friend or a stranger. Give them your full attention. And listen to the human being behind the words. Because one of the biggest gifts we can give anyone is the gift of being heard. With the simple power of listening now, we can transform our relationships, our families, and our world for the better, ear by ear." [9]

Listening not only positively impacts those we listen to, it also has a positive impact on the listener! In another TED Talk, "The Power of Deliberate Listening", Ronnie Polaneczky states...

"Deliberate listening doesn't just change the people who are listened to, it changes the listeners. It pulls us out of ourselves and it reminds us that we are all connected." [10]

Oliveros also acknowledges how the listener can be changed by the process of listening.

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“Through accessing many forms of listening we grow and change whether we listen to the sounds of our daily lives, the environment or music. Deep Listening takes us below the surface of our consciousness and helps to change or dissolve limiting boundaries.” [1]

What impact could it have, if collectively we cultivated a deeper capacity to listen? Negotiator William Ury addresses this as well...

“If we listened more, what difference would it make in the world? I believe it would make a huge difference. As in the course of my mediation work I personally witnessed the enormous cost of conflict, the broken relationships, the broken families, the stressed-out work places, the ruinous law suits and the senseless wars. And what always strikes me is the biggest opportunity we have actually is to prevent these conflicts even before they start. How do we do that? It's not easy, but it almost always starts with one simple step: Listening.” [9]

Importance of Listening within the Boquete Health & Hospice Foundation

Of course, the Boquete Health & Hospice Foundation recognizes the importance of listening in the context of human connections as well. In the organization’s *“New Volunteer Training Manual”* [11] the Volunteer Job Description states that a volunteer should “demonstrate good listening and communication skills.” And in the section describing duties, it states that one is expected to “act as good listeners for patient and/or family members” and “listen and provide support to patient and significant others.” The section on *“Emotional Support – Caring”* states that “caring demands listening and observing with your whole person” and that “if the volunteer can listen without having to give answers, the patient may feel freer to express emotional conflicts and turmoil.” The manual also states that “a volunteer who has learned to listen and to be at ease with these uncomfortable feelings can be of great help.” In *Chapter 5 – Communication* (p.79-87) there is an entire section on listening skills and active listening, which includes attending fully to the other, being present, eye contact, avoiding a focus on one’s own problems and concerns, accepting the other’s feelings and concerns, maintaining silence, etc. Clearly the organization recognizes the importance of listening and the “Magic of Music” Team can help cultivate this important quality in human interaction and connection.

How to Get Started with Deep Listening

How can you get started cultivating a deeper capacity for listening? Listening to music is an easy and natural way to begin a practice of deep listening. A recent article in the LA Times [3] suggests picking three of your favorite albums to begin your own experience with deep listening. When was the last time you listened — *actually listened* — to an album from start to finish? Here, the focus is on listening with attention, like you were watching a movie or reading a novel. Musicians spend years making their albums. They struggle over syllables, melodies, bridges and rhythms with scrutiny to minute details. But most of us are not fully attentive when it comes to listening to albums. We put on an artist’s work while we’re cooking, cleaning, or obsessively checking social media. We rip our favorite tracks from their natural long-player habitat, drop them into playlists and forget the other songs, despite their being sequenced to be heard in order. And you may recall, a Stravinsky ballet, [“The Rite of Spring”](#), once caused a riot! Have you ever listened to hear what all the fuss was about? [3]

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Here's how to start your experience of deep listening using your favorite albums.

1. Clear your schedule for the next three hours.
2. Choose three full albums, whether from your collection or your streaming service of choice.
3. Put them in an ordered queue as though you were programming a triple feature.
4. Get comfortable on the couch, which, ideally, is centered in the sweet spot between the speakers. Alternatively, put on your headphones or earbuds, or your best Bluetooth speaker.
5. Set the music at a comfortable volume, but not too loud.
6. Make a pact with yourself to not engage with any distractions like your cell phone.
7. Listen intently to every nuance of your sonic experience.

You can also explore the world of deeper listening by attentively tuning in to this collection on Spotify:

- [Deep Listening Playlist on Spotify](#) (50 Songs, 4.5 Hours)

Also, if you are interested in works by Oliveros and a few others who specifically created sonic works for deep listening, check out the following works. [5]

- [Deep Listening - Pauline Oliveros, Stuart Dempster and Panaiotis](#)
- [Bye Bye Butterfly - Pauline Oliveros](#)
- [Disintegration Loops - William Basinski](#)
- [The Thing Itself and Not the Myth - Kate Carr](#)
- [The Secret Life of the Inaudible - Annea Lockwood and Christina Kubisch](#)

As you explore this world of deeper listening to your sonic environment, notice how you are affected by a deeper capacity to listen. How is the perceiver (you) affected by the perceived (the sound)? Oliveros states:

“The perceiver and the perceived co-create through the listening effect. All sounds are included in the field. This creates potential, cultivates surprises, opens the imagination and approaches and even plunges over the edges of perception into the mystery of the universe.” [6]

Listening opens us up to the mysteries of the universe? Well yes! And as a case in point, why not try deep listening to black holes from deep in outer space! A Belgian mathematician recently unveiled songs synthesized from the actual sound of black holes! Here's a sample track from his album.

- [Mikromedas AdS/CFT 001](#) by Valery Vermeulen

Practices and Exercises in Listening (Listening as Meditation)

In order to cultivate the capacity to listen more deeply, the experts in the various TED talks quoted earlier in this article also advise us that it takes practice.

“How do we listen? It turns out that we often take listening for granted as something easy and natural. But in fact, at least in my experience, real genuine listening is something that needs to be learned and practiced every day. The real problem in the way, what makes it so hard to listen

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is that there is so much going on in our minds - so much noise and distraction - that we don't have the mental and emotional space to be able to truly listen..." - William Ury [9]

"Listening is not meant to be a difficult task, and it's not meant to be an art. Listening simply requires us to be. We don't have to respond, or offer feedback, or sound wise. All we have to do is stop. We need to withhold our judgements. We need to put aside our own agendas, turn off our gadgets, and silence our thoughts." - Karyn Gagnon [8]

These experts are essentially pointing toward listening as a meditative practice. Indeed Oliveros' original deep listening experiment was a culmination of her own personal journey, not only into making and listening to music and sound, but also cultivating the capacity to listen as a meditative technique. She began her career as an electronic music pioneer in the 50s - part of the San Francisco scene of composers, artists and poets at that time. Her professional career continued as a music professor at the University of California in San Diego, and there she retreated into her own world of sound, beginning to sing, experimenting combining music and sound with breath and movement. These frequent sessions of experimentation eventually resulted in the collected texts called "Sonic Meditations" first published in *Source* magazine in 1971. [12] "Sonic Meditations" is a collection of exercises for people to perform in groups and alone and were intended to expand consciousness, to improve awareness, and to work as a system of healing — or a "tuning of mind and body." These eccentric sound exercises she once called "recipes" for listening. [5,7] This work was, to an extent, unique in the history of musical experimentalism. In these works, experiments were not conducted on the music; the music was an experiment on the self. [7]

Evolving from "Sonic Meditations", the musical pieces of "Deep Listening" that Oliveros recorded in the cistern are meditative without falling into the stylistic trappings of new age music; instead, they enact core tenets of meditative practice—reflection, attentiveness, an openness to one's surroundings—in a musical framework. [2] Commenting on listening as a meditative practice which evolved from this work, she states...

"For me Deep Listening is a life-long practice. The more I listen the more I learn to listen. Deep Listening involves going below the surface of what is heard, expanding to the whole field of sound while finding focus...I have been practicing this meditation ever since with more or less success. I still get the reminders after forty six years." [1,6]

So how does one utilize deep listening as a meditative practice? Oliveros herself explains...

"Listen to everything all the time and remind yourself when you are not listening." [6]

Listening is also suggested as a meditative practice by several spiritual leaders and meditation teachers. Spiritual teacher Jean Klein discusses the profound benefits of intentional "unconditioned listening" in his book "The Ease of Being". Angelo Dilullo, author of the recent book "Awake: It's Your Turn", also advocates listening as a transformative practice. Via the channel "Simply Always Awake" on YouTube, he

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recently posted exercises to help cultivate listening as a meditative practice which can lead to expansion of consciousness and personal transformation. Try it out for yourself! Here are the links...

- [Simply Always Awake: Non-Duality and Sound - Exercises to work with keeping your attention in the sound field](#)
- [Simply Always Awake: Non-Duality and The Sound of Silence – Exercises to cultivate listening without interrupting thoughts](#)

Conclusion

The Boquete Health & Hospice organization recognizes the importance of listening as a core skill for its volunteers. In addition, many musicians, scientific researchers, speakers at TED Talks, and spiritual leaders have been weighing in on the significant impact of cultivating a deeper capacity to listen. Listening deeply can open up new worlds of experience, from a more profound enjoyment of music, to improving and deepening the human connections and relationships in your life. But, it doesn't stop there! It also quite literally has the potential to transform your life through consciousness expansion. Are *you* listening?

We Welcome Your Feedback

What is your experience with deep listening? What are your favorite sound tracks for cultivating a deeper capacity to listen? Let us know! Email us at Music@boquetehospice.org

REFERENCES

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- [14] ["Radiance: Pauline Oliveros Part 1, Deep Listening"](#) (2016)
- [15] ["The Ease of Being"](#) – Jean Klein (1986)
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