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Hearing Essay

By Evelyn Glennie (1993)

Music represents life. A particular piece of music may describe a real, fictional or abstract scene from almost any area of human experience or imagination. It is the musicians job to paint a picture which communicates to the audience the scene the composer is trying to describe. I hope that the audience will be stimulated by what I have to say (through the language of music) and will therefore leave the concert hall feeling entertained. If the audience is instead only wondering how a deaf musician can play percussion then I have failed as a musician. For this reason my deafness is not mentioned in any of the information supplied by my office to the press or concert promoters. Unfortunately, my deafness makes good headlines. I have learnt from childhood that if I refuse to discuss my deafness with the media they will just make it up. The several hundred articles and reviews written about me every year add up to a total of many thousands, only a handful accurately describe my hearing impairment. More than 90% are so inaccurate that it would seem impossible that I could be a musician. This web page is designed to set the record straight and allow people to enjoy the experience of being entertained by an ever evolving musician rather than some freak or miracle of nature.

Deafness is poorly understood in general. For instance, there is a common misconception that deaf people live in a world of silence. To understand the nature of deafness, first one has to understand the nature of hearing.

Hearing is basically a specialized form of touch. Sound is simply vibrating air which the ear picks up and converts to electrical signals, which are then interpreted by the brain. The sense of hearing is not the only sense that can do this, touch can do this too. If you are standing by the road and a large truck goes by, do you hear or feel the vibration? The answer is both. With very low frequency vibration the ear starts becoming inefficient and the rest of the body's sense of touch starts to take over. For some reason we tend to make a distinction between hearing a sound and feeling a vibration, in reality they are the same thing. It is interesting to note that in the Italian language this distinction does not exist. The verb 'sentire' means to hear and the same verb in the reflexive form 'sentirsi' means to feel. Deafness does not mean that you can't hear, only that there is something wrong with the ears. Even someone who is totally deaf can still hear/feel sounds.

If we can all feel low frequency vibrations why can't we feel higher vibrations? It is my belief that we can, it's just that as the frequency gets higher and our ears become more efficient they drown out the more subtle sense of 'feeling' the vibrations. I spent a lot of time in my youth (with the help of my school Percussion teacher Ron Forbes) refining my ability to detect vibrations. I would stand with my hands against the classroom wall while Ron played notes on the timpani (timpani produce a lot of vibrations). Eventually I managed to distinguish the rough pitch of notes by associating where on my body I felt the sound with the sense of perfect pitch I had before losing my hearing. The low sounds I feel mainly in my legs and feet and high sounds might be particular places on my face, neck and chest.

It is worth pointing out at this stage that I am not totally deaf, I am profoundly deaf. Profound deafness covers a wide range of symptoms, although it is commonly taken to mean that the quality of the sound



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heard is not sufficient to be able to understand the spoken word from sound alone. With no other sound interfering, I can usually hear someone speaking although I cannot understand them without the additional input of lip-reading. In my case the amount of volume is reduced compared with normal hearing but more importantly the quality of the sound is very poor. For instance when a phone rings I hear a kind of crackle. However, it is a distinctive type of crackle that I associate with a phone so I know when the phone rings. This is basically the same as how normally hearing people detect a phone, the phone has a distinctive type of ring which we associate with a phone. I can in fact communicate over the phone. I do most of the talking whilst the other person can say a few words by striking the transmitter with a pen, I hear this as clicks. I have a code that depends on the number of strikes or the rhythm that I can use to communicate a handful of words.

So far we have the hearing of sounds and the feeling of vibrations. There is one other element to the equation, sight. We can also see items move and vibrate. If I see a drum head or cymbal vibrate or even see the leaves of a tree moving in the wind then subconsciously my brain creates a corresponding sound. A common and ill informed question from interviewers is 'How can you be a musician when you can't hear what you are doing?' The answer is of course that I couldn't be a musician if I were not able to hear. Another often asked question is 'How do you hear what you are playing?' The logical answer to this is; how does anyone hear?. An electrical signal is generated in the ear and various bits of other information from our other senses all get sent to the brain which then processes the data to create a sound picture. The various processes involved in hearing a sound are very complex but we all do it subconsciously so we group all these processes together and call it simply listening. The same is true for me. Some of the processes or original information may be different but to hear sound all I do is to listen. I have no more idea of how I hear than you do.

You will notice that more and more the answers are heading towards areas of philosophy. Who can say that when two normally hearing people hear a sound they hear the same sound? I would suggest that everyone's hearing is different. All we can say is that the sound picture built up by their brain is the same, so that outwardly there is no difference. For me, as for all of us, I am better at certain things with my hearing than others. I need to lip-read to understand speech but my awareness of the acoustics in a concert venue is excellent. For instance, I will sometimes describe an acoustic in terms of how thick the air feels.

To summarize, my hearing is something that bothers other people far more than it bothers me. There are a couple of inconveniences but in general it doesn't affect my life much. For me, my deafness is no more important than the fact I am female with brown eyes. Sure, I sometimes have to find solutions to problems related to my hearing and music but so do all musicians. Most of us know very little about hearing, even though we do it all the time. Likewise, I don't know very much about deafness, what's more I'm not particularly interested. I remember one occasion when uncharacteristically I became upset with a reporter for constantly asking questions only about my deafness. I said: 'If you want to know about deafness, you should interview an audiologist. My speciality is music'.

In this web page I have tried to explain something which I find very difficult to explain. Even so, no one really understands how I do what I do. Please enjoy the music and forget the rest.

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