EDITORIAL: Listenings

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In 2005 Dutch musicologist, composer, and writer Elmer Schönberger gave the Huizinga lecture entitled ‘Het Grote Luisteren – reikhalzen naar muziek’ [The Large Listening – yearning for music].[1] It is a passionate plea for a disinterested, disengaged listening to ‘real’ music, music as an autonomous art form, and explicitly opposed to popular music with its connection to ‘easy’ or consumptive listening. With great enthusiasm, Schönberger joins the heritage of Eduard Hanslick and his ‘tonend bewegte Formen’ [tonally moving forms] and Peter Kivy’s ‘music alone’. He condescendingly refers to the late 18th century, the only period in Western history in which the utmost refinement and the greatest music-technical complexity had merged with the popular virtues of street songs: the Mozart operas and Haydn symphonies.

Schönberger’s Large Listening is a structural listening to high art that has, obviously, disconnected itself from socio-historical circumstances. Large Listening is not only a return to the basic material of music, to the tones themselves, but also requires understanding of the structural, architectural, and expressive richness of this ‘music alone’. Large Listening is listening to Webern, Stravinsky, Bach, Purcell, and Bruckner instead of Procol Harum’s ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale’ (all examples are taken from Schönberger’s lecture).

Of course, a special issue on the topic of listening should not and cannot object to such an urgent call for attentive listening. To put listening on the agenda also means to ask for concentration, time, patience, and the willingness to renounce instant acoustic gratification. To develop the ability to listen, to listen closely, attentively, and open-mindedly, is demanding; it asks for (a passive) activity, for participation, and for a suspension of countless prejudices. Careful listening sharpens all senses.

However, one of the questions (implicitly) raised in this issue is whether it is absolutely necessary to allow this Large Listening to converge with a return to the well-known canon of (male) high-art composers. R. Murray Schafer’s contribution, with which JSS2 opens, consists of a video registration of a lecture given by him during the 2011 World Forum for Acoustic Ecology in Corfu, circling around the idea, which Murray
Schafer propagates since the late 1960s, that the same attentive listening is also required to open our ears towards the everyday sonic environment in which we are accustomed to live. Only through careful listening, a critical reflection on the sounds that accompany our daily activities is possible, a critical reflection which may finally lead to the development of a more conscious acoustic design.

Perhaps Murray Schafer’s message carries slightly reactionary overtones, overtones that are absent in Ruth Herbert’s essay. Her attention to everyday listening activities is no entreaty for re-designing our sonic environment, nor does it lead toward a plea for Schönberger’s Large Listening. On the contrary, she argues that we should take this everyday listening, closely linked to forms of listening that are so strongly rejected by Schönberger, very seriously. First of all, this Large Listening is revealed to be all too often permeated by periods of distraction as well as an absence of concentration solely on the pure sounds or structural composition of a piece of music; and conversely, everyday listening, in which music is connected to other sensory input, frequently does also lead to new and valuable experiences. For Herbert, music is seldom alone.

Another necessary addition to the conventional idea of structural listening, a listening which asks for rational reflection and analytical distance, is attention for listening modes that are operative before or beyond reflection and analysis. Two essays especially deal with certain preconscious listening activities. In ‘Listening to Deep Listening’, Sharon Stewart auto-phenomenologically gives an account of her experiences with Deep Listening as advocated by American accordionist and composer Pauline Oliveros. Deep Listening absolutely calls for an attentive listening, however, not only on the level of tracing structures, architectures, or compositional forms; rather, it tries also to connect to sounds or music before or beyond those structures, a more or less immediate contact which takes place through a bodily involvement. The essay contains much original material from Oliveros’s music and workshops; therefore Oliveros could almost be considered a co-composer of this article.

Bodily involvement is also the starting point of Adel Ying Wang’s contribution. Taking two main figures of contemporary Chinese sound art as concrete examples, she breaks a lance for what she calls an ‘affective listening’, a listening with and to our bodies. Affective listening is a commitment to forces, intensities and becoming. One listens to what Deleuze and Guattari call the ‘haecceities of sound’, which are only later reduced and signified as harmony, melody, or emotions. Both affective and deep listening can be
linked to Buddhist meditation in that they lead to self-transforming rather than self-transcending.

Salomé Voegelin’s ‘Ethics of Listening’ leads to what might be considered a countermovement: toward transcending the self rather than transforming it. Her text, a philosophical fairy tale, preludes an imaginative change of paradigm, from a culture, discourse, and language anchored on the visual to one based on a sonic materialism in which every stability and constancy is challenged. Truly creating a space in which listening plays a leading role can (and should) thus have far more fundamental consequences than another attempt to defend high art music and its accompanying intellectual approaches.

In ‘Seven Metaphors for (Music) Listening: DRAMaTIC’, Joshua Mailman discusses these, and other, types of listening. Mailman intends to show the complementary and sometimes interdependent nature of diverse aspects of listening and refuses to pin the act of listening down to a single essence. He explains the various natures of listening via seven metaphors: (1) Digestion, (2) Recording, (3) Adaptation, (4) Meditation, (5) Transport, (6) Improvisation, and (7) Computation. Mailman asserts that this set of metaphors promotes recognition of the inherent plurality of listening modes by staking out distinct facets which cannot be reduced to one another, nor relying on the assumption that one aspect is more important than the others.

One aspect that Mailman does not discuss is the political side of listening. Huw Hallam suggests in ‘The Production of Listening: on Biopolitical Sound and the Commonplaces of Aurality’ that listening and making oneself heard are fundamentally political. Hallam explores the key forms of this political aspect in the age of biopolitics and neoliberalism via artistic evocations of sonic production and listening in works by André Kertész, Iannis Xenakis and Federico Fellini. Two major contemporary paradigm-creating situations of listening are central in this discussion: the institutional network where sound art continues to stake out territory, and the private auditory ‘bubble’ generated by the mobile personal audio-player.

Isobel Anderson attempts to open up a discussion of the relationship between sound, stories and place, using examples of sound art pieces that explore the listening potentials of this combination within site-specific audio works. In ‘Voice, Narrative, Places:
Listening to Stories’ she argues that these works tell stories of and/or in place, which Anderson refers to as site-specific stories. These stories require the listener to engage creatively with their narratives and, therefore, induce a productive listening state. Anderson concludes that further analysis and discussion of oral storytelling within sound art and its relationship to site is needed in order to understand the productive listening potentials of this combination, which shape our surrounding environments.

Besides discussing the act of listening, we will also listen even more closely to the voices of others. More specifically, starting from this issue, we will include reviews of books that discuss relevant, new, and important issues concerning auditory culture. This time, Daniela Cascella and Marcel Cobussen have listened closely to Salomé Voegelin’s Listening to Noise and Silence and Ruth Herbert’s Everyday Music Listening: Absorption, Dissociation and Trancing, respectively. Herbert’s book addresses the issue of listening from the perspective of everyday experience, while the main focus of Voegelin’s work is the singular aural encounter with sound art. Everyday Music Listening seems to be a good example of addressing types of listening which are precious and valuable outside the domain of Large Listening. Listening to Noise and Silence definitely invokes an attentive, open listening attitude, closely connected to Large Listening, but simultaneously settles scores with the kind of structural and analytic listening as (implicitly) advocated by Hanslick, Kivy, and, in their wake, Schönberger.

The Journal of Sonic Studies thus willingly provides a space for investigating a plurality of listening modes while refraining from an attempt to organize them in any hierarchical order.

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1. The Huizinga Lecture (Dutch: Huizingalezing) is a prestigious annual lecture in The Netherlands on a historico-cultural or philosophical topic. It is named after the Dutch historian and cultural philosopher Johan Huizinga (1872-1945). Since 1972 people such as Noam Chomsky, George Steiner, Joseph Brodsky, Jorge Semprun, and Simon Schama have given this lecture.