

# On listening

I will never forget my very first concert, playing the Purcell Golden Sonata to my Junior School when I was nine. During the Canzona I suddenly realised that I had just spent the previous two lines thinking about something else altogether. The next two lines were then given to thinking how extraordinary this was - to be able to play without thinking about it. (The playing was not bad, apparently - the headmaster complimented me afterwards on my 'fine tone and intonation'. I remember wondering what 'intonation' was, exactly.)

It is not just children whose attention wanders. Even though a musician playing without listening is as odd as a painter who puts colour to canvas without looking, or a sculptor who is not closely in touch with the material he is shaping, I think surprisingly few musicians hear and craft as much of their 'material', sound, as they could.

Listening can also be difficult for the audience. Compared to watching a film and becoming totally engrossed to the exclusion of anything else, listening to a concert can be difficult, especially if the works are not familiar. Perhaps this is because TV, film, drama, ballet, opera, etc. all combine so many different and complementary elements, whereas music on its own is so rarefied and abstract. At any rate, many listeners react as much to the posture, facial expressions and 'body language' of the performers as to the actual sound produced, which may be poorer or duller than they think.

If you really want to know how someone *sounds*, whether in a lesson or a concert, the best thing is to shut your eyes. The American violinist Joseph Silverstein once commented that much playing and teaching is conducted on a *visual* rather than an aural basis, and that during lessons he often catches himself watching the hands, the bow...while forgetting to hear the sound.

## Sculpting Sound

Complete listening comes out of unending fascination with sound and expression, which creates in the player a perpetual questioning: *what is the quality of the sound coming out of the instrument?*

The tone of a string instrument is multi-dimensional, consisting of clearly audible over-tones, sympathetic vibrations, harmonics, acoustic beats, vibrato 'throbs', shifts, left hand articulations, extra sounds of excess bow pressure or speed, surface noises, bow changes - and all these in relation to the principal note. However, many musicians are so bound up with other aspects of playing that these sound qualities remain quite unnoticed.

For example many players, professionals included, are often frankly astonished when it is shown that the open 'A' and 'E' strings vibrate when an in-tune 'A' on the 'G' string is played, and will confess to never having heard this (or the other sympathetic vibrations) before. Acoustic beats and 'third tones' unfailingly produce similar amazement from otherwise experienced players when they first hear them.

It is vital that the player should hear and work with these 'extra sounds', even though the audience cannot hear many of them. One easy way of immediately improving the average player is to draw attention to the ring of the instrument *in between* notes, which few notice or attend to as a central aspect of tone production. (The playing of the principal note is instantly

and dramatically improved by making it produce maximum resonance. String instruments should *echo*.)

When you fully *hear* the instrument's sound it can seem like an other-worldly, three-dimensional almost touchable 'substance', with its own ever-changing colours, form and density, that can be shaped - there, 'in the air', as it comes out of the instrument - just as a sculptor shapes wood or a painter mixes colours.

However, many players fall into the trap of 'hearing' the expression, the tone quality, the shape of the phrase, *mentally*, and the actual sound remains a shadow of the sound-quality conceived within. For example, to play a crescendo, it is necessary to hear the sound of the first note as it comes out of the instrument, then to make the second note louder in proportion to the first, then to increase the third note in relation to the second.

That may seem obvious, but how often is it suggested to someone that they make a crescendo (for instance), and they are surprised because they tonight they already had? Or we are surprised when we hear a recording of our own playing? Or the conductor makes mechanical gestures that do not result from (and in) actual sounds from the players? Or a virtuoso, playing with a machine-like evenness of tone and vibrato, somehow leaves you cold?

Because the mechanics of string playing are so complex even musical players can get caught in the trap of largely playing *the instrument* rather than *using the instrument to play music*. Then, because of insufficient listening, long musical lines and phrases are unwittingly broken up by bow changes, position changes, string crossings and inappropriate left-hand articulations.

A common attitude is that if you feel the music enough it will communicate itself. Leopold Mozart wrote 'it is as clear as sunlight that every effort must be made to put the player in the same mood as reigns in the piece'. But on its own this is not enough to produce communicative playing. Shutting eyes and ears and going off into a storm of personal, inner emotion is not the same as *crafting the actual sound*.

The great pianist Artur Schnabel said the artist, while playing, must be at the same time one hundred per cent the 'inner man' as well as one hundred per cent the 'outer man', Even though a fine performer is able to give an impression that the music 'plays itself', it is created through a series of describable, physical actions which tailor the actual sounds coming out of the instrument. Further, just as an actor's make-up must be exaggerated so that it appears correct from a distance, the musician must deliberately create sufficiently larger-than-life musical drama and expression so that the audience can receive it.

Since each movement of the bow or the left hand has a particular physical feeling (it is obviously by repeating that movement/feeling that the same sound can be repeated), one could talk in terms of 'the sound of the feeling' and 'the feeling of the sound'. Experimenting during practice is literally a question of asking 'What does this sound *feel* like?' and 'What does this feeling *sound* like?'

### Selective hearing

If we are not aware of - and shaping - the actual sound as it comes out of the instrument, what are we doing? Often, even the best players are really only noticing inconsistencies and irregularities in the sound, which has otherwise become a general background noise to various day-dreams, thoughts, feelings, hopes and fears. Attention is instantly drawn on to the sound when errors of pitch, rhythm or tone occur...for that moment. Then the sound fades into the background again as it evens out, until the next error happens. (If the player is prone to

anxiety he may worry about his mistake - meanwhile not listening to the present sounds - until the next irregularity or error occurs, when he finds he has got something new to think about.)

‘Mistake-noticing’ gives the impression of sharp listening because at an advanced level not a single faulty sound can escape unnoticed by the player (and can often be instantly corrected so that nobody else notices). *But all the sound in between the errors is not directly perceived and purposefully shaped.*

Listening like that is a bit like sitting on a factory conveyor belt checking for dented cans - nothing is noticed *except* dents! Or like a good driver, sensitive to his engine, who can detect the smallest change in its rhythm yet be quite unconscious of it the rest of the time.

Most of us are not even ‘mistake-notices’, but remain only partial listeners, attention alternating between the sound and many other thoughts and feelings. Once technical actions have become habitual it is obviously possible even to play very well without being in touch with the sound at all.

Paradoxically, the ‘best’ technical practice, where an unpolished phrase is repeated over and over again, is the most likely to encourage a trance-like, unaware state. When a real misjudgement does happen, the question to ask is: where was my attention an instant before the mistake? (Although that is still not enough: avoidance of errors through highly-developed concentration does not in itself make an artist!)

Sound does not cease being noise and become music just because it is beautiful and harmonious. It is not possible to play *music* mechanically and without feeling; only ‘notes’ can be played like that, and remain no more than ‘sound’ - even if played superbly. Hearing and creating clear musical language and emotion in the actual sound is no less an experience for the player guiding the sound than it is for the audience. But without true listening, playing is really reduced to pulling a bow across the string.

## Fantasy and thought

In certain respects an apparently wandering attention while playing - going off into musical, emotional and dreamy ‘fantasies’, for example - is natural and important, while stiff and unrelenting concentration would be forced and creative. (In that sense perhaps my concentration in the ‘*Golden Sonata*’ was not so bad!) Whatever level a player has arrived at his best playing is always in a sense unconscious, having entered into a ‘dreamy’ state where the music simply pours out of him. If you are ‘conscious’ in the wrong way it can make playing almost impossible, just as any actions that normally happen automatically - walking, talking, eating, etc. - become stilted and awkward when we consciously try to perform them.

As teachers we must be particularly careful, while still teaching musical language and concrete technique, to foster and enhance this natural dreaminess which is at the centre of artistry and creativity. But that is a subject all of its own.

How much ‘thought’ is necessary whilst playing? Rather more is needed for practising, but the danger is that this ‘rather more’ is an ever-increasing amount which over-flows into actual performance, instead of ever-decreasing, through practice, to very little. Since it is impossible to think and directly hear the sound of your playing at exactly the same time, most trains of thought are strictly out of place whilst playing, since to all intents and purposes the instrument is sounding but the player is absent. ‘Music while you think.’

Much of the mental work of practice can be done away from the instrument - ie learning notes, rhythms, bowings, fingerings, dynamics and phrasing, technical or musical analysis, making decisions regarding interpretation and performance, etc. Sitting quietly studying the score can be vastly more productive than trying to play what you are still unfamiliar with, and the ear remains fresh and doubly receptive when the bow is put to the string.

This aspect of 'practice' should be taught from as early a stage as possible, and not left until college-level players and above (if then). Learning how to practise mentally can begin at a very early age.

It is debatable whether it is really possible to listen properly during many hours of playing. (Menuhin recommends using a practice mute to avoid tiredness, which seems incomprehensible since any proper work with sound is prevented.) While most of us must also - or mainly - learn by playing, it is worth remembering that Kreisler could learn a new piece entirely by studying the score, never playing it before the actual concert-day. Glenn Gould did not even have a piano in his house for many years. An example today is the fine cellist Steven Isserlis, who likes to have a fairly good idea of what he wants before he approaches the piece on his cello, and does a lot of preliminary work at the piano.

One immediate consequence of improved listening is, obviously, immediate and dramatic improvement in the standard of playing. Another is that concert nerves are diminished or totally eliminated. As already mentioned briefly, you cannot think and listen at the same time, so when the player is fully engaged in listening the mind becomes calmer.

Interestingly, the more musical the player the more difficult listening can be, because the inner musical world has correspondingly more depth and clarity. Even good teaching, stressing the importance of listening to the inner voice and of pitching notes mentally in advance of playing them, is misleading if the student is not finally helped towards real control of the sound.

It is not necessary to be a top, world-class artist before you can hear sound coming out of your instrument, and shape it musically and expressively; but I am certain the puzzling truth is that few of us actually play like this. A musician must be like a sculptor of sound, deliberately and physically shaping a describable quality of sound in a particular fashion, nuance by nuance.