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# Reorienting Audition Through Bodily Listening in Place

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## **B**ODILY Listening in Place, exercise no. 10, 31 March 2022

*Sunlight streams through the window of my music room, spilling out across a low chest and onto the variegated maple floor. Sunlight plays across the dark shiny grain of the old wooden chest, reflecting and shifting as I move. I slide the sunbeam across the surface of the chest by moving laterally. A blue and yellow Ghanaian batik runner threads the middle of the chest, interrupting the reflection, the colours intensified in my sustained gaze.*

*I stand sock-footed in the patch of sunlight on the floor. Warmth of light, chill of floor on my feet. I am holding my flute.*

*I resist the urge to close my eyes and bathe in the familiar intimacy of sound. Instead, I keep my eyes open and play long, low tones while focusing on the play of sunlight, the warmth, and the feeling of toes and heels as I curl, lift, and lower them while never losing contact with the floor.*

*I am acutely aware of my flute. Of how it feels in my hands, under the pads of my fingers, stale, sour, metallic smell of old breath lingering in the head joint. I focus on my finger pressure on the keys. Inadvertently lifting my right middle finger causes a slight leak, a small squeak. I try to let sounds emerge as a by-product of my interactions with flute, feet, light, and space.*

*It's hard not to produce sounds consciously, but I am intent on trying to make music that decentres the sonic.*

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Figure 1: Bodily Listening in Place, exercise no. 10, 31 March 2022.

Listening holds a central place in Music and Sound Studies both as a process integral to musicking and sounding and as a metaphor for certain kinds of attention. For example, composer Pauline Oliveros's philosophy of "Deep Listening" is a metaphor for empathy producing good relations, while Indigenous Sound Studies scholar Dylan Robinson's concept of "hungry listening" is a metaphor for extraction producing bad relations. For many critical improvisation scholars, moreover, listening is understood as essential to an ethics of co-creation (Caines; Fischlin et al.; Ramshaw and Stapleton). Listening is often evoked as a bodily metaphor, as in the advice to "listen to your body" and not overstrain sore muscles, or "listen to your heart" to make a good decision. In practice, however, for most scholars, listening is unquestionably oriented to the sensory regime of

audition, despite increasingly well-documented practices of haptic, kinetic, and visual musicking by musicians and sound artists such as Evelyn Glennie, Christine Sun Kim, and Pamela Witcher (Cripps et al.; Holmes) and conceptual links drawn between Deaf and Sound Studies (Friedner and Helmreich; Sterne).

*Bodily Listening in Place* is a proposition to explore environmental musicking beyond the confines of the auditory. The goal is to decentre, and thus reorient, audition through play with visual, kinetic, and haptic senses in place. If we understand “listening” as a metaphor for contact, attentiveness, and relationality, then the construct “music” expands beyond the auditory to encompass intersensory modes of environmental experience. *Bodily Listening in Place* is also an instructional score for intersensory improvisation by diverse bodies (hearing and non-hearing, seeing and non-seeing, by any means and with any level of mobility). I have developed this work in consultation with SPiLL Propagation, Artist Center for Creation and Production in Sign Language in Canada ([www.spill-propagation.com](http://www.spill-propagation.com)).<sup>1</sup>

While preparing to compose my score, I engaged in a series of creative exchanges with Deaf artist Tiphaine Girault and hearing artist Paula Bath between February and May 2022. For example, I recorded audio files of my improvisations that Tiphaine listened to via the Woojer vibrotactile vest with embedded transducers that translate sound to vibration.<sup>2</sup> Here is Tiphaine’s response to my piece *Ellen for Tiphaine*:

I feel like I am in a car. A small car that allows me to feel the environment outside. I pull over. It is raining. I feel the rain-drops tap slowly. One by one. Then violently on the top of the car roof. Then whoosh the wind musters up a strong [gust] up to one side, then the other ... then even from underneath. I can feel the wind and the rain through my fingers as they hold the steering wheel. The car moves. My fingers move. I can see the rain fall.

Because the vest is not designed to pick up the high registration of solo flute, Paula also interpreted the piece by moving her fingers on Tiphaine’s back, providing an ethical model of listening interdependence.

1 *Bodily Listening in Place* was commissioned by New Adventures in Sound Art and funded by the Canada Council for the Arts.

2 The Woojer vibrotactile vest is designed to enhance the visceral experience of video gaming by translating low frequency sound (0 to 200 Hz) to vibrations. See [www.woojer.com](http://www.woojer.com).

Tiphaine, in turn, produced a narrative drawing of her perceptions of the piece (figure 2) that I subsequently interpreted as a new graphic score. Through this series of interactions, plus conversations and writing, Paula and Tiphaine have helped me to expand my capacity for intersensory listening.



Figure 2: Tiphaine Girault interpreting *Ellen for Tiphaine*.

Two intersecting pathways have emerged through this research-creation project. The first is reorienting the way I “listen” through an intentional focus on movement, touch, smell, and sight, and to a lesser extent taste, to expand my conception of listening. This is valuable because, as ethnomusicologist Tomie Hahn reminds us, “If we consider that we inhabit different sensory worlds—personally and culturally—then building awareness of the sensibilities *someone else* might be experiencing can expand our knowledge of self/other and open communications” (2). The second pathway is being mindful of creating scores and performances that are accessible to a wider range of sensory modalities. For example, I have experimented with a pitch shifting guitar pedal and vocalizing through the flute to create a grainier, lower timbre palette more easily perceived by

vibrotactile media. The score for *Bodily Listening in Place* is in both text and video formats with ASL translation, and my realizations of the score are for audio and video.<sup>3</sup> Developing a sustained intersensory listening practice as a musician, however, is quite a challenge. It has altered my listening habits, throwing me off balance, literally leaving me in suspense.

The practice I'm calling "bodily listening in place" requires something akin to what Natasha Myers and Joe Dumit have called improvising in a state of mid-embodiment. Writing about the intra-active practices and responsive bodies of scientists engaging with experimental media and communicating their findings through narrative and embodied gesture, Myers and Dumit observe that new insights and forms of dexterity are acquired in the process. Their concept of the "responsive excitability of bodies" is used to "account for how it is that experimentalists acquire new kinesthetic, affective, and conceptual dexterities as they engage in the process of learning to see, feel, and know" (250). Their description matches my embodied experience. I am learning, all over again, how to *listen*.

Of course, Myers and Dumit's article is implicitly ableist. It assumes a seeing, hearing, mobile subject, and, in that respect, it is like most writing about music, sound, and listening. (Recent work on music, sound, Deaf culture and disability, such as that cited above, is beginning to provide a much-needed corrective to this bias.) We need to account for the complexities of working across Deaf and hearing music cultures, and what I'm attracted to is precisely what can be learned in this reciprocal intercultural encounter. For example, my work with SPiLL Propagation has made me attuned to vibrations (seen and felt) with an intensity that I've never experienced in five decades of making music in all kinds of environments. When I listen to music through the vibrotactile vest, I can only discern a generalized buzzing and rhythmic thumping. My haptic sense, it seems, is woefully underdeveloped. What does it mean to acquire dexterity in a sensory mode? Or better, what does it mean to adopt an intersensory approach to listening that encompasses multiple possible sensory modes? And what happens when we foreground interdependence as a valid and precious ground for musical creativity? These questions animate my desire to reorient audition through bodily listening in place. Following Myers and Dumit, I situate this intersensory practice as "hovering in a space of not knowing, mid-embodiment," and I concur that "this is the space in which improvisation and creativity flourish" (255).

3 The score and realizations of it by me and others are available at [www.naisa.ca/media-archive/sound-art-text-scores/bodily-listening-in-place](http://www.naisa.ca/media-archive/sound-art-text-scores/bodily-listening-in-place).

*I pick up the flute once more. Spend some time just touching it, feeling it touch me, smelling that rancid smell, rolling the patterned edge of the little cap that seals the head joint across my cheek. It is so intimate that I am suddenly self-conscious. A feeling that this might be too gimmicky intrudes on the experience.*

*I close my eyes and see a glowing, luminous cloud of yellow. I play this cloud which turns pink and purple as I turn my body in space. The resulting music is just a three-note repeated motif, but it shifts in intensity and timbre along with the play of colour behind my eyes. It feels lovely.*

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