

Cobblestones, windscreen wipers and a fizzy tablet

Listening is the willingness to change.

Listening is a personal experience that happens largely under the radar of consciousness. Without realising it, each of us listens in a way that is guided by our unique and culturally-defined set of mental frameworks and filters. We all listen differently, but rarely do we talk about our differences in perception.

The sound and listening organisation **aifoon** invited ten people – a hybrid group of artists – to come together and listen. During these '**salongs**', as the meetings were called, the participants would go on blindfolded soundwalks and listen to field recordings, soundscapes, a live sound concert, new music, and more. After the listening sessions, they reflected on, among other things, the experience of listening as a group, the impact that the physical space has on the act of listening and, most of all, the observation that there are so many different '**listening attitudes**' or ways of listening to the same sound.

The British listening expert Julian Treasure compares listening to observing the world from a bunker. When we listen it's like we're looking out through a small opening: there is a lot we don't see and, viewing everything from the same position, we are unaware that we are becoming bound to this perspective. But the bunker has an exit: if we open the door, go outside and discover different perspectives, we can transform our attitude with regard to our environment. And, in this way, we can also learn to listen differently: by swapping our entrenched position for a new place outside the bunker.

Inspired by the diversity of possible listening attitudes, the Salong-members decided to make **a list**. Not an encyclopaedic or scientific inventory, simply a list. Their own list of **different ways of listening**, with everyday examples.

The list came about in an intuitive manner and can be endlessly expanded. The listening attitudes and experiences described are no more than possibilities. An invitation to leave the bunker behind – and, with it, one's old, trusted ways of listening – in favour of a life enriched by new ways of listening. It is also an invitation to add to our list, to nuance and refine its contents.

A list of listening attitudes

Expectant listening

Sound mutates over time; you never know what's coming next. When you listen expectantly, with anticipation, you open yourself up, you prepare yourself to be surprised or amazed. Consider the moment before a concert begins. Or think of the sound recordist waiting with bated breath to capture the sound of an overflying jet.

"To me, listening to a sound clip together in silence is a very beautiful thing in itself. I was already feeling grateful before the clip began, waiting in suspense for what would come."

(Diederik De Cock)

Associative listening

It could be said that all listening is associative in a way. With this listening attitude it's all about 'connection': sounds take on additional meanings or connotations. You hear something and think about something else. A listening experiment conducted by aifoone with a group of listeners revealed that in the morning the sound of rain was associated with showering, while the same sound heard around midday reminded people of butter sizzling in a pan. Associative listening is personal by its very nature: everyone makes their own, unique associations.

"Listening to the field recording sparks your subconscious, stimulating projections based on your own personal experience. The landscape that you create in your mind, is like a stroll through a dream." (Caroline Claus)

Recollective listening

Recollective listening is a specific form of associative listening. It is involuntary, something that just comes over you. Like Proust's madeleine cake, a certain sound can catapult you back in time, and make you relive something. The chiming of a rope against a flagpole may take you back to your youth by the sea, high-pitched tones may remind you of the dentist, the clippety-clop of horseshoes on cobblestones may remind you of fetching milk from the local dairy, a particular ringtone may remind you of your first mobile phone, and so on.

Perhaps you don't always have control over how you listen.

One person may be more liable to daydream, may more readily make associations or jump to different conclusions.

To what extent can you guide your listening attitude?

(Thomas Vertongen)

Judgemental listening

Sometimes the way we listen is prejudiced. While listening, a certain mindset may lead particular emotions to bubble up that may in turn cloud the experience. Consider ingrained opinions such as ‘hip hop is aggressive and mean-spirited’ or ‘scoring a love scene with violins is tacky’. Or, for that matter: ‘Tom Waits never sings a bum note’.

Resonant listening

A personal and physical reaction to sound. This is an open approach to listening, free from desire, where every auditive impulse is let in without judgement and experienced with the senses. The sound connects with something within yourself, resulting sometimes in tears or goosebumps.

“Whether it’s ambient sound or a field recording, it’s like a sort of sound carpet that you can stretch out on”. (Boris Snauwaert)

“You let yourself dissolve into the sound, like a fizzy tablet in a glass of water.”
(Anyuta Wiazemsky-Snauwaert)

Analytical listening

This is a professional approach to listening – imagine the sound engineer on a film set searching for the source of the hum on his headphones – but it is also an attitude that we all apply in our daily lives when we ask ourselves ‘What am I hearing, exactly?’ Such as when you’re on your bike trying to gauge the traffic behind you. Or when you hear someone coming down the stairs and attempt to identify the person based on the sound of their gait.

What struck me was that most people listened very visually. That was really new to me. In my listening experience there is perhaps the occasional image, but for me it is primarily an abstract world of sound.

(Heleen Van Haegenborgh)

Unravelling listening

By focusing on a single sound or sound source at a time, you can attempt to unravel a soundscape or piece of music. This approach is like carefully teasing out the individual fibres of a woven fabric. Once you have one thread, you can – without letting it go – pick out the next, and so on.

“Practicing unravelling listening brought about a change in me. I’m by no means a technical listener; when I listen consciously, a landscape invariably appears. But now I have discovered that I can turn down the volume on one sound in order to hear another more clearly. Spectacular.” (Eva De Groote)

Relational listening

When you listen relationally, you observe auditory relationships. You listen in an open way and make links between the sounds that present themselves or between sounds and visual stimuli. A windscreen wiper pulses to the same rhythm as the music on the car stereo, two angle grinders and a lawnmower together create a harmonious chord, you hear a bouncing basketball and see a broken window ... The connection might pop into your head spontaneously or you might seek it out by listening to the world as you would listen to a composition. Relational listening is inherently creative.

We must always recognise that listening is something fluid, and that different listening attitudes can exist separately or in tandem. That, like water, some attitudes can ebb and flow as we listen.

(Stijn Demeulenaere)

Irritated listening

This is when you are disturbed by the sound you are perceiving. This negative attitude can often arise due to factors such as an excess of sound, the time of day, social friction and one's age. Examples include drilling noises at seven in the morning and loud phone conversations on the train. You are forced to listen to something you don't really want to hear but over which you have no control.

Restorative listening

When, after overexposure to (auditive) stimuli, you seek out a different, quieter place or play sounds or music in order to come to an auditive null-point. Such as by consciously selecting a record in the hope that it will relax you after a stressful day or deciding to take a stroll outside after a metal concert.

Empathic listening

A compassionate or adventurous form of listening, where you try to transport your mind to another location or the body of another person. How would someone from Syria perceive this sound? Will moving that heavy cabinet tonight be possible without waking the kids?

I let myself be transported by the sound. It was like my mind was elsewhere. When I opened my eyes, the space appeared completely different to what I had imagined while listening.

The walls were much closer.

(Anyuta Wiazemsky-Snauwaert)

Alert listening

This is when you listen in a focused manner, prepared for anything. All auditory stimuli are detected and perceived and actively related. *Anxious listening* – is that a burglar I hear? – is one type of alert listening. Another possible variant is *risky listening*: challenging yourself to seek out your physical limits, such as by walking on the road amid busy traffic and observing how this situation affects your listening.

Spatial listening

Every sound originates in physical space. Try to form an image in your head of the space around you by listening and attempting to situate and distinguish the sounds in front of, behind and beside you. This exercise is all about orientation and the physical aspect of listening. A remarkable form of spatial listening is echolocation: the ability to locate objects by emitting (clicking) noises and listening for their reflection, a skill sometimes cultivated by people who are blind or have a visual disability.

Comments and contributions welcome!

“Listening is personal. It is changeable and layered, sometimes taking place subconsciously. Listening sparks the imagination. As a listener you are not impartial: the way we listen is shaped by our personal history and the context of the moment. Listening is thus an inherently subjective experience in which creativity and the engagement of the listener can play a major role: the listener is the artist.

We hope that with this list we have been able to add a few colours to the artist’s palette.” (Stijn Dickel)

Can you think of any other listening attitudes?

Let us know: send an email to info@aifoon.org.

Listen for yourself:



Chris Watson – Vatnajokull: Chris Watson was one of the founders of the experimental band Cabaret Voltaire. He is passionate about recording the sounds of animals and natural habitats from across the globe and specialises in the creation of spatial sound installations.

Stijn Demeulenaere – Latitudes: Stijn Demeulenaere is a Belgian sound artist and field recordist. In Latitudes he brings together sounds from North and South: from Iceland to South Africa.

Folk Music of the Sahel Vol. 1: Niger – Tuareg Chant: Field recordings from Niger, where old musical and oral traditions are threatened by modern assimilation.

Steve Reich and Musicians – Drumming: percussion experiment with African polyrhythms by the minimal composer Steve Reich.

Matthew Herbert – One Pig: an album on which musician Matthew Herbert documents the 20-week life of a pig, from birth to slaughter and plate.

Start to Listen: a free online toolbox of interesting clips to listen to, along with accompanying questions.

SALONG is:

Caroline Claus: urban (sound) researcher

Stijn Demeulenaere: sound artist, field recordist & composer

Diederik De Cock: sound designer

Eva De Groote: writer and artist

Stijn Dickel: listening artist and artistic director of aifoon

Thomas Vertongen: sound designer

Boris Snauwaert: photographer, graphic designer and spatial planning coordinator

Heleen Van Haegenborgh: pianist and composer

Anyuta Wiazemsky-Snauwaert: photographer and multimedia artist

Ellen Stynen: editor

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