Musical Experiments in an Ethics of Listening

*Iain Campbell, University of Edinburgh*

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*‘What is free improvisation? Nothing is known in advance of making the music.’  
- Pauline Oliveros, ‘Quantum Improvisation: The Cybernetic Presence’*

In what follows I offer some reflections on an ethics of listening, or perhaps more generally a philosophy of listening, that can be discerned in different forms in the experimental music that, since the 1950s, has challenged and radicalised how music is understood. I situate these reflections around three of my own concert experiences as an audience member.

**London, June 2016**

At the Southbank Centre’s ‘Deep Minimalism’ festival, Pauline Oliveros (1932-2016) directed a performance of her piece *Tuning Meditation* (1971). Oliveros is well-known for her participatory works and sonic meditations that accommodate musicians and non-musicians alike, and *Tuning Meditation* is exemplary of this form. Its score consists of simple text instructions, directing participants—in this case the several hundred audience members—to sing a vowel sound for the length of an exhalation, listen to what those around them are doing, and, with their next sung tone, either synchronise, or ‘tune’, with one of the voices they hear, or sing a tone they don’t hear.

As a non-musician I began with some trepidation, unable to resist comparing myself to the evidently trained singers around me. But within a few minutes I settled into the rhythms of my breathing and sounding, and into an attentiveness to my surroundings, from the voices I could hear individually through to the curious, emergent ripples of sound that swept across the space of the Baroque St John’s Smith Square church. My individuality as a participant was no doubt intact, but this individuality was at the same time inseparable from the small group around me, and beyond this from the participants as a whole, the three held together in a mutual exchange. Through a disciplined practice of sounding and listening, a distinctive, varied collectivity could be felt to emerge, albeit temporarily. After around twenty minutes of performance, without any instruction, the participants slowly fell into silence.

Oliveros would describe the *Tuning Meditation* in terms of a constant shift of attention from the inside to the outside, from one’s own imagination to the actions of others, initiating a kind of reflection and communication that can’t be easily pinned down. And for Oliveros, the scope of this attentiveness is vast. She describes improvisation as involving ‘listening to everything that I can possibly perceive in order to tune to and flow with the Sonosphere’, and to improvise is thus to attune oneself to the sound of the world, or with the world as sound, ‘beginning at the core of the earth and radiating in ever increasing fractal connections, vibrating sonically through and encircling the earth’.

There are weighty metaphysical implications here, but in Oliveros’s work it is never simply a case of putting forward abstract theses about the nature of sound. It is rather a matter of forging new attunements, and new listening communities—for Oliveros herself this was intimately linked to the attempts to found new kinds of social existence that were key to the lesbian radical feminism of the 1970s and 1980s. In the words of the journalist Kerry O’Brien, ‘experiments were not conducted on the music; the music was an experiment on the self’. In Oliveros’s work music, improvisation, and listening are interlinked practices to guide us in rethinking how to be together, how to coexist with other people and with the world.

**London, August 2012**

To mark the 100th anniversary of his birth, the BBC Proms dedicated an evening at the Royal Albert Hall to the composer and thinker of sound and music John Cage (1912-1992). Cage is significantly responsible for the popularity of the term ‘experimental music’, and his simple definition, in a text from 1955, makes a claim for the term ‘experimental’ to be understood ‘not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as of an act the outcome of which is unknown’. This definition provided for many a flexible frame for thinking about music outside of its conventional structures, and Cage’s work in the decades that followed pursued this idea in diverse ways.

In the mid-1970s Cage composed a series of works to be performed with natural materials, and on this evening at the Royal Albert Hall a piece written for amplified plant materials, *Branches* (1976), was performed. This performance saw multiple performers spread across the hall, each with a table of various plant materials, such as dried leaves and cacti, with simple sound systems set up to amplify the performers’ interactions with these materials. The ‘score’ (consisting largely of Cage’s messily handwritten notes) instructs performers to improvise, with the time units that segment the piece determining only the materials to be used in that segment. Many of the attendees, myself included, were seated on the floor amidst the performers. As a listener, the experience was a striking one. The UK’s most prestigious concert venue became a space that felt decidedly ‘unconcertlike’, the scattered rustles of leaves and plucks of cactus spines forming a space quite distinct in character, a nascent new form of listening space. In much of my academic work since this evening I’ve sought to explicate what kind of space this was.

The kind of interaction that takes place in the concert environment, particularly in what, for want of better terms, we call ‘classical music’ or ‘Western art music’, seems quite clear. The audience face the orchestra, and the orchestra is taken as a unity, with the conductor serving a unifying role. The audience can thus adopt the position of a subject observing and assessing the object of the orchestra. The primary criterion for this assessment is the score, the composer’s authoritative blueprint for the actions the members of the orchestra should perform. With this form of relation between listener, performer, and composer, a certain kind of listener can take their own position of authority within the situation, feeling justified in judging harshly the timing of the violinist, or in feeling irritation towards a child who refuses to stay seated. But *Branches* does not adhere to this relational logic, and so it raises for the listener a constellation of questions that wouldn’t normally arise in the concert hall.

In the traditional concert situation, where to direct your attention is clear. But with *Branches* the listener finds small, quiet sounds emanating from every direction, with no means of prioritising one source over another. In contrast to the unified and unitary whole of the orchestra, each sound source attains a certain autonomy, while at the same time existing in the same space as the others—in Cage’s terms, ‘interpenetrating’. The contingency of the listening situation also comes into focus. Seated here I listen to a certain configuration of the sounds around me, I mark a single point where the sounds meet, but I could walk to the other side of the room and hear things differently. As each of the sound sources is a singular point, so is each of the listeners.

But the questions that arise reach beyond the concert hall, too. The most striking question is—why plants? Plant materials could hardly be any more different a source of sound than the highly refined technical objects that are modern musical instruments. And where the virtuosic musician seems to exert complete command over their instrument, the plant material, in its materiality, pushes back—it is unpredictable and fragile, and the performer can only guess at what sounds interaction with it will make. Trying to replicate the ‘pleasing’ sounds discovered may prove impossible. This allows for the plant materials to serve the non-intentionality that Cage, inspired by Zen Buddhism, sought to bring to music. Questions like success or error are sidelined as all-too-subjective, being ultimately reliant on the arbitrary authority of individual tastes. What is rather at issue is enacting an entangled coexistence, between listeners, performers, and the material world of plants, all of which can be considered as part of the opaque ‘nature’ that proved a topic of fascination for Cage throughout his life.

**Glasgow, May 2019**

The 2019 iteration of Tectonics, Glasgow’s two-day festival of ‘new and experimental music’, primarily featured the work of contemporary composers, but the themes of coexistence and entanglement that become prominent in the experimental music of Cage and Oliveros remained a central concern. Yet they are themes that today are stated with an increasing urgency. Pieces by young composers, such as Genevieve Murphy’s (1988- ) *Calm in an Agitated World* and Jennifer Walshe’s (1974- ) *The Site of an Investigation* seem, in very different ways, to stress not only a need for coexistence, but moreover that what coexistence we have is under threat, and that any attempts to renew and rebuild it will be strewn with difficulty.

I reviewed this festival for *Leonardo Reviews*, and in the closing sentence of my review I asked a question—‘what if coexistence is not enough?’ Now, however, I’m not sure if this was quite the right question. A peculiar feature of the legacy of mid-twentieth century experimental music is how readily some aspects of it were taken up in educational contexts. In his 1977 book *Music, Society, Education*, the musicologist Christopher Small argued that experimental music’s challenge to the precepts of Western art music had the potential to play a role in revolutionising not only education, but society as a whole. On Small’s account, if we succeed in undermining a musical education grounded in structured knowledge, formal schemes, virtuosity, and the purportedly objective Western canon, we may be able to bring into being new modes of collective living, with each other and with nature. Yet, despite isolated instances such as the controversy surrounding reforms to the British music curriculum in the early 1990s, musical education has easily adopted themes from experimental music, such as independence, exploration, and creativity. Far from revolutionising education and society, these themes have been neatly integrated into the emerging neoliberal educational agenda.

What I think this shows, and what Oliveros already showed us, is that any tenets that we may associate with experimental music, coexistence among them, can’t be taken abstractly. This is an issue that has followed Cage since the 1960s. His attempts to do justice to ‘nature’ by eliminating subjectivity from performance has led to justified criticisms of his failure to adequately account for how gender, race, and sexuality can play a determining role in one’s relation to music and access to musical spaces. Cage encourages us to listen in new ways, but leaves other ways of listening unexplored, and with this experimental music serves to exclude. What I want to emphasise here, then, is not experimental music as an abstract doctrine or theory, but as a practice, and a practice of posing problems and devising contingent solutions to these problems. Cage emphasised this himself, stating that ‘[w]hat can be analyzed in my work, or criticized, are the questions I ask’, but seems to have failed to question ‘the social’, taking it as too much of a given. What the critical literature on Cage shows is that gender, race, and sexuality are as much ‘materialities’ that we live with and face up to as plant materials are. They too push back on our attempts to manage the world we occupy.

The ‘themes’ of experimental music, themes such as coexistence and entanglement, seem more relevant than ever, being the topic of significant inquiry in recent theoretical approaches to the arts, humanities, and social sciences, such as in the new materialisms, Actor-Network Theory, and work around the Anthropocene. Yet this potted history of, and my personal history of experience with, experimental music shows that to stay at the level of the theoretical is not enough. If experimental music is to have an ethical component, if it is to enact coexistence rather than only theorise it, it must be through a concerted practice.

What would this practice look like? It’s perhaps not very ‘experimental’ to try to determine this in advance, but returning to Oliveros’s notion of ‘tuning’ suggests at least one important consideration. Oliveros understands this notion to involve a kind of attunement that is non-hierarchical in character, producing and promoting egalitarian social forms. Yet, as the feminist theorist Sara Ahmed and the musicologist Danielle Sofer have argued, attunement can also be a tool of exclusion. If individuals, particularly individuals who are already marginalised, are ‘out of tune’ with institutional demands, they can easily find themselves silenced. The test of experimental music’s contribution to a radical pedagogy, then, may come through its capacity to listen to those who are ‘out of tune’.