

The Listening Cobweb

[Aura Satz, Evelyn Glennie](#)

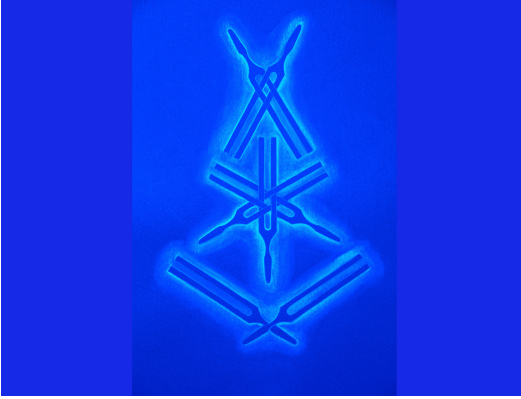
<http://admin.thecontemporaryjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Aura-Satz-The-Listening-Cobweb.mp3>

An offshoot of Satz's work on expanded listening this newly commissioned sound work continues her ongoing portraits of listening with percussionist Evelyn Glennie. Glennie has been profoundly deaf since the age of 12 and has taught herself to hear with parts of her body other than her ears.

Part of the project 'Preemptive Listening', which reimagines sirens and emergency signals in an age of intersecting manmade and ecological disasters, Satz explores new sounds not only scored to immediacy, but signals set to a longer temporal frame, sounding the alarm for the inaudible, the remote, the unimaginable. In a time of increasing environmental noise and alarm fatigue, emergency signal recalibration is urgent. The project explores new inclusive ways of looking and listening, bringing in aural diversity through a low-frequency and vibratory/haptic approach. The invitation is to listen to these new siren sounds on the thresholds of music, sound and vibration as a call to attention, an instruction, alternating between signal and background noise, an invocation of mood and atmosphere.

Glennie originally devised the percussive sequences underscoring this sound composition as new siren sounds, with the intention that they may also be fed through vibratory devices such as mobile phones in order to activate the other senses through vibration. Here the sounds punctuate her thinking around listening as a specialised form of touch and as a multimodal form engaging all the senses – hearing through the soles of the feet, sight, smell, all woven into and alongside the inner acoustics of one's mind. As Glennie notes:

'Hearing is basically a specialized form of touch. Sound is simply vibrating air which the ear picks up and converts to electrical signals, which are then interpreted by the brain. The sense of hearing is not the only sense that can do this, touch can do this too. If you are standing by the road and a large truck goes by, do you hear or feel the vibration? The answer is both. With very low frequency vibration the ear starts becoming inefficient and the rest of the body's sense of touch starts to take over. For some reason we tend to make a distinction between hearing a sound and feeling a vibration, in reality they are the same thing. It is interesting to note that in the Italian language this distinction does not exist. The verb 'sentire' means to hear and the same verb in the reflexive form 'sentirsi' means to feel. Deafness does not mean that you can't hear, only that there is something wrong with the ears. Even someone who is totally deaf can still hear/feel sounds.'^[1]



Aura Satz, *Tuning Forks – The Listening Cobweb*, watercolour and pencil on paper, 2021. Courtesy the artist.

Transcript

[voice by Evelyn Glennie]

When I'm in the privacy of my own four walls, playing an instrument, I feel the acoustics of my mind.

I am a believer that, in a way, by viewing our bodies as a big resonating chamber, a huge ear, that it allows every single part of that body to participate.

When I engage with low frequency instruments, such as bass drums, timpani, the Irish Lambeg... so many of the low, low sounds, like a water drum, then you know that a large part of your lower body will be engaged in that sensation. And it's my favorite frequency that I like to be in.

It's as though you're diving into a sea of sounds.

And literally it is all around you.

Higher sounds are much more challenging to digest, not so much the digestion of actually feeling something, but because the journey is much quicker and it's more difficult to hang on to that journey – the resonance of the sound

through the body – because it is very much up in your scalp, or cheekbones, your neck, your breast area, just all the way up.

You get that initial ping, initial *trrrr*, and then it goes. It's as though it's a bumblebee that's just flying right past your eyes, and then you don't know where it's gone.

The listening of my instruments is very much attached to the audience's presence. My sound has to come out of my interior system, so out of the engine that I have, and I have to attach that to the acoustics of my mind, um, and I have to see the instruments as an extension of my limbs.

When I connect to sound through my feet, it's extremely sensitive. I roll on my feet a lot when I play, and I'm getting up on my tiptoes or on the heels, or just roll to the side, and so on. You know, partly that's because of the nature of the physicality of playing percussion, where you have to think vertically and horizontally in your actual movement. But I also feel that there's such a big difference too, when I listen with shoes on, and when I listen not having shoes on.

The whole existence of the body is listening. You're able to feed the sound through your body, but you're also allowing the imagination not just to come from the upper part of your body, but literally through every limb that you have available.

Tuning into a room really starts as soon as you walk into a venue because the eyes are immediately soaking up all the information possible.

And then in a way, I find that smell and taste have a big part in just giving you that little bit of information. When there's a kind of pure, clear smell, you feel open and more resonant, rather than somewhere that is quite closed, or quite stuffy, or quite oppressive.

At the moment, you know, I can look out the window and there's a fairly large tree and it's quite windy outside. And I'm just seeing all those beautiful images of the leaves, just swaying in different directions, the branches are going here, there, and everywhere. And I look at this, there's probably no sound in this room from the tree, but I'm seeing a loud dynamic out there. And so that for me and how it's swaying will give me a sense of how I would interpret that tree.

When we think about listening and in my case, you know, having been through the journey of being treated by audiologists, you know, for such a long time, and had so many tests and measurements of hearing – there's still quite a divide between having your hearing measured in a controlled environment to then walking out the door in the real world and that's the soundscape you have to negotiate.

This is what deaf people do, you know, when they're dealing with sound – is connecting all of the other senses to that sound. It isn't a case where, well you can't hear that, oh well, that's a shame. It's not a shame! It's a wonderful opportunity to get everything else stirred up!

Try to find those bridges between one sense and another because it's really like a cobweb, you know, one can't do without the other. And even if you, you know, pull at a bit of a cobweb and it seems to snap, the rest is absolutely as solid as can be... it's right there hanging on. It's really incredibly powerful that the other senses will mend that other bit of the cobweb.

Every single time I pick the instrument up, I just think 'now what?' and it's just so giving an instrument and it's giving, I think, partly because I'm allowing it to give. When you allow all of the limbs to be open and the whole body to be as free as possible, you can almost *be* that sound as opposed to trying to work out what that sound is. You can just *be* the sound, let it go.

Credits:

Composition and editing: Aura Satz

Voice and sounds: Evelyn Glennie

Sound mix: M.J. Harding

Cite this piece as:

Satz, Aura, Evelyn Glennie. 'The Listening Cobweb'. *The Contemporary Journal* 3 (June 01, 2021).

[<https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/strands/sonic-continuum/the-listening-cobweb>].

[1]

Evelyn Glennie, 'Hearing Essay', *Evelyn Glennie: Teach the World to Listen*, 1 January 2015.

<https://www.evelyn.co.uk/hearing-essay/>