

Learning to Listen

Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. ... When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand.

Karl Menninger

Listening is an activity that connects us deeply to others. It can change how we perceive the world, and then, how we decide to live in it.

To listen suggests an open, receptive stance, without necessarily knowing what will arrive. It suggests alertness, willingness. Listening is essentially an act of respect and generosity. It is a time for keeping our egos quiet, for hearing others' needs and opinions. Many of the great leaders of historical and contemporary times, the visionaries, the peacemakers, the activists and healers, are essentially great listeners. A great leader has an ability to listen acutely to the concerns of their era, to imagine what might be possible, and to bring that to life. It's interesting to think about what that could mean for the role of musicians in society now.

Musicians are consummate listeners. Our attentiveness is a gift, with potentially broad-reaching applications. I would love musicians to realise that we have skills that go way beyond the specifics of our craft as instrumentalists, composers, researchers, programmers, therapists, funders, managers, critics, teachers, administrators, broadcasters, producers – whatever our musical practice is. Listening with care, hearing complexity, and noticing subtlety need not be purely professional music practices, but tenets for living. Such listening has radical potential.

I've titled this talk *Learning to Listen* because I think listening is what music uniquely offers – a space to encounter, to experience, to extend our thinking and imagination. In that spirit of listening, I would like to acknowledge that we gather on the traditional lands of the Gadigal/Wurundjeri people, and to pay my respects to elders past and present.

I would also like to acknowledge your presence, here in this room. Without you, listeners, this forum would not exist, and I would not have had the privilege and the particular challenge of trying to articulate some thoughts on music. Without listeners, a great deal of our musical life would not take place. You are essential.

So, I thank you, and I also thank the New Music Network, for their vision in creating this annual event – the only public address on music in Australia. In speaking tonight, I follow in the footsteps of some of our most esteemed colleagues. I am honoured and delighted by that.

As I have prepared this talk, I have done my best to summon the spirit of the inimitable Peggy Glanville-Hicks. Sadly, we never met. I first came to know her via her Recorder Sonata, and with that introduction, listened avidly to many of her works. The last months, I've been listening again, reading her scores and writings, as well as words that others have written about her life and music. She's an inspiring role model for me, a woman born a couple of generations later, still grappling with similar questions: in essence, how to mold a life around a love for music. She's left us a strong legacy – her music, her writings, and her house, to support the work of Australian composers. Hers was generous, big-hearted work. It's in that spirit I hope to speak.

Peggy Glanville-Hicks was an exceptional listener. Between 1947 and 1955, as music critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, she listened continuously. She spent a great deal of her life not only writing music, but writing and speaking *about* music. She was an advocate for the artform and its practitioners, in many different contexts. Her words are forthright, considered, intelligent, and spirited. It seems that her desire was to convince as many people as possible about the joys of new music, by framing it in ways that made it accessible and interesting to broad audiences. She worked as a composer, writer, reviewer, concert organiser, public speaker, director of organisations, fundraiser, compere and presenter, committee member, publicist, impresario, producer and entrepreneur of her own works and others. She's a great role model for being able to keep one eye on detail, one on the big picture, being able to balance her own work and needs as an artist with her strong sense for community, being single-minded about the demands of her compositional work, and able to see her role as a musician in the world as necessarily multi-faceted.

Tonight, in honour of Peggy Glanville-Hicks, I will play a series of one-minute pieces, all commissioned for this occasion, written by dear friends and long-term collaborators. I thank them for their generosity in responding to my request, and for creating a series of beautiful works. They're stylistically diverse, as is my practice and my taste. As you know, new music in Australia takes many forms. I think of tonight's music as a touchstone, a way of giving the words breathing space, and a way of bringing us back again and again to the essence of why we're here.

What you'll hear from me is, at its core, a practitioner's musings, a series of reflections, interlaced with music. The thread that binds the parts is my imagination of the spirit of Peggy Glanville-Hicks. A spirit urging us to be daring, to act with integrity, to imagine what's possible, and to work hard to create it, to be passionate and unstinting in our support of one another, and of music.

In the words of Winston Churchill:

Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.

MUSIC: *Footprint* (Elena Kats-Chernin)

I am a recorder player, and my instrument exists on the fringe of western classical repertoire. I have, at best, a fleeting cameo in the grand scheme of that history. I love this position. It gives me great freedom. The reality of being a recorder player based in Australia is that there is no ready-made job for me here as a performing musician. Nothing exists unless, together with others, we create it. My work is to invent possibilities, contexts and audiences for the music, people and ideas I'm passionate about. It's a privileged way to live.

Debates rage, and have for countless generations, in many cultures, as to whether our energies are best spent preserving old traditions, adapting them for changing times, or making new ones.

For artists, these questions arise daily. The very substance of our lives is shaped around a complex dance with the past, a desire to articulate our now, and our imagination of possible futures.

Margaret Atwood makes the following comment:

All writers must go from now to once upon a time; all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past. And all must commit acts of larceny, or else of reclamation, depending on how you look at it. The dead may guard the treasure, but it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more – which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change.

Nowadays, most of the music I play comes from the present, from my desire to enter Atwood's "realm of change" with an audience. I work a lot with composers, which in essence means putting my recorders and my self into a series of laboratories, endlessly testing and redefining limits.

Sometimes composers ask me to produce sounds I thought the recorder couldn't make. Trying to find them is like being an inventor. It's about lateral thinking, endless patience, endless listening, horrible stubbornness, and sometimes, a fleeting "Hang on, what if...?" that spins everything on its head and crashes me unsteadily through to a new place. Thanks to my marvellous composer colleagues pushing my ears, my imagination, my technique, where I land is somewhere unexplored, and suddenly, my instrument and I take on new dimensions. It's one of my favourite parts of being a musician.

Playing the premiere of a piece is a living-on-your-nerve experience. It comes with dreadful responsibility, or so it can feel. It's hard not to see this creation as a child, trusted to my care. I know that in the sweep of history, the person who plays the

premiere is irrelevant – what matters is that the piece comes into the world, to begin its journey of travelling through time into other hands, other ears, other contexts. But at the moment of its birth, I can't help feeling as though I have a role in its delivery. That makes for an intense bond.

The idea of a score as a holy relic is an idea that's relatively new. I understand the desire to get as close as possible to a work of art we consider rich, to examine it from every angle, to take great care with the particularities of what it can tell us, as a way of honouring the composer who created it. But every composer I have ever worked with has changed the score while we have been rehearsing. Sometimes it's been in small ways, often in huge, jaw-dropping ones. Most composers are musicians with hypersensitive ears and brains. Standing in a room beside players, listening to the physical realities of a specific acoustic and particular bodies interacting and producing sound, perspective changes, and with it, the score does too. The notation becomes peppered with amendments, bizarre scrawls and remarks that only I understand.

This process often amuses me: I have spent decades in the world of early music, where every marking on a score is an object of scrutiny. Working with composers, I know that what is left to history is incomplete, inaccurate, often something else entirely from what happened in performance. I giggle over the riddles that some poor musicologist, a few hundred years down the track, might attempt to solve with this music, trying to learn more about performance practice in the early twenty-first century. It's a slippery thing, notation, and there's so much it can't tell us.

When I'm faced with something that looks or feels unplayable, I often think of the Vivaldi concerti I learnt as a young person, and still play today. When I began to learn those pieces of music, they seemed unachievable. If Vivaldi had been a young composer handing me some of that passagework, I almost definitely would have suggested changes – inserting places to breathe, rewriting parts where the figuration is extremely awkward, re-thinking passages where the number of notes per second exceeds normal bodily reality. Yet I have learnt to play those Vivaldi pieces, without amendments. It's always precarious, but what looked superhuman on the page now lies within my body. That experience makes me uneasy about telling a composer now that something's not possible. It's a question of investing enough time.

I don't ever have that kind of time before the first performance of a newly written piece. I took years to learn my Vivaldi. I've never had years with a brand new score before the premiere. At most, I have months, more often, weeks, alarmingly frequently, only days. So after I premiere a piece, I try to adopt it, to take it into my repertoire and my care and play it again and again. I like to live with music, to sleep on notes, to have sounds quietly simmering in the back of my head, to catch glimpses of a phrase unawares, out of the corner of my eye, in short, to listen. I love that unhurried infusion, different from the searing imprint of pressure and pace that a premiere demands.

It's only after living with a piece for months or years that I begin to be able to do it justice. I love being at the birth of something. But I love seeing it grow and mature too. It seems short sighted to invest in a composer, a creative act, a performance, and then let that work languish and die through neglect. I couldn't play my Vivaldi so well if I hadn't played it for years, if presenters hadn't continued to invest in opportunities for me to perform it publicly.

In the words of Jeanette Winterson:

If truth is that which lasts, then art has proved truer than any other human endeavour. What is certain is that pictures and poetry and music are not only marks in time but marks through time, of their own time and ours, not antique or historical, but living as they ever did, exuberantly, untired.

If we want our contemporary pieces to live exuberantly, untired, to become part of our culture, to become part of the way we listen to our landscape and ourselves, we have to be prepared to invest in them, over many years. If we want to give our composers the chance to create their best works, we have to champion them, to play their works again and again, to coax and cajole them into writing new ones, to be their advocates at every turn, to take their sounds into every possible context. We want music born here and now to become some of those indelible marks through time, reaching across continents and centuries. It is our privilege and our responsibility to do everything we can to shepherd these works into the world, and then to play and to listen to them again and again and again.

MUSIC: Perception (Andrea Keller)

When I'm nervous, before a performance, there's one thing I try to remember. "Just breathe and listen," I tell myself. "It's as simple as that." And it is.

I know that if I can get there, there's a place where all existence is pure breathing and listening. In that place, I'm immersed in sound. I'm part of something much older and bigger than I am. It's beautiful. In that place, I am tenderly, powerfully connected to the people making sound around me, to the people listening, to a long line of music-making ancestors, to people whose spirits I love and carry, and to people I'll never meet.

Some of the clearest, truest times I have known have been encounters with people and music, when it has felt as though together, we have inhabited that elusive, breathing and listening place. I have sat in prisons and at funerals, with groups of people immobile with despair and loss, and music has given us solace. I have seen children come wondrously alive to themselves, to each other, and to their world, thanks to music. Listening to someone play, I have felt whole, or torn to shreds by sound.

As theatre maker and director Peter Brook says:

... The way of the theatre ... leads out of a loneliness to a perception that is heightened because it is shared. A strong presence of actors and a strong presence of spectators can produce a circle of unique intensity in which barriers can be broken and the invisible become real. Then public truth and private truth become inseparable parts of the same essential experience.

For four years, I worked with a community in and around Bermagui, NSW. It was an experience that taught me more than I can say. In theory, I was the Artistic Director of a music festival called *Four Winds*. In practice, I found that my role was much more sprawling. It had to do with care, with listening, with custodianship, with imagining a future, with hearing what a place and a community yearned for and helping them to make that real. I had the privilege of coming from outside and being able to reflect things back in new ways. I also had the privilege of being invited in, to dream and make creative projects with a disparate, diverse group of people.

Often, coming home from my time there, I would feel desolate about my own limited ability, in the face of what seemed such essential work. I wondered what resources I could draw on within myself, to make a decent contribution. What I realised one day, to my relief, was that this project was chamber music writ large. Fundamentally, what I needed to do was to listen closely, and respond. I understood that I could take my sensitivity to tone, nuance, sound, silence, body language, and cultivate that in a much broader context.

I understood too, that my performance courage could be useful. That strange, long practised ability to be steely clear in the moment, under scrutiny. The willingness to stand and dare, to put my self on the line in a public place.

And I revelled in music's ability to start conversations, to expand possibilities, to ask radical questions, to be clear, idealistic, uncompromising and fierce, as well as gentle and healing.

I learnt there about new types of virtuosity. Not just the pristine, athletic concert hall type, but the sleeves-rolled-up virtuosity of trying to do justice to many viewpoints, to honour different perspectives, and weave together complexity and inconsistency, in much less privileged spaces.

So my listening skills, my precarious freelance existence, my life on the edge of most people's realities, helped me hear fragile, joyful, sometimes troubled, always wonderfully complex stories, and, together with a community, to find ways to articulate them.

In the words of John Berger, a hero of mine:

I can't tell you what art does and how it does it, but I know that art has often judged the judges, pleaded revenge to the innocent and shown to the future what the past has suffered, so that it has never been forgotten.

I know too that the powerful fear art, whatever its form, when it does this, and that amongst the people such art sometimes runs like a rumour and a legend because it makes sense of what life's brutalities cannot, a sense that unites us, for it is inseparable from a justice at last. Art, when it functions like this, becomes a meeting-place of the invisible, the irreducible, the enduring, guts and honour.

MUSIC: *Distraction* (James Ledger)

Australian musicians are a diverse mob – our taste and sensibilities, creative works, performances, audiences, desires and needs are as wide ranging as our life stories. Australian music covers vast terrain, as it has for tens of thousands of years. Across our huge continent, our indigenous first peoples lived and breathed cultural traditions, musics, and languages that varied greatly from place to place. Within settler culture, our family ancestries link back to a myriad of different ways of life across the world. Ours is a rich place, and being Australian means different things to each of us.

Musical scores are tangible things, recordings too. But music is ephemeral. Sometimes, I wonder whether our skirmishes over territory, about who programs what and where, how funding is allocated, what the proportions are or should be, might be tying us to a way of seeing the world that's somehow limiting.

Don't get me wrong. As a freelance musician, I understand the urgency around questions of currency. I understand the formidable reality of trying to make a living out of being a practising artist. I watch many superbly talented friends and colleagues living below the poverty line. Often, the artists who struggle most are those who have made brave choices. They're on their own paths, experimenting, questioning, challenging. They're not on salaries. Their work is almost invariably new, and their own. They're grappling with questions of form and content, of how to articulate complex, flawed, fragile, beautiful, contemporary realities. Their art, their imaginations, their superbly sensitive hearts and skills, have little monetary value in a largely material world.

Should we hear more of their voices? In my mind, these are our seers and prophets, the chroniclers of this time and place. Listening to them is essential. Nurturing and supporting them is imperative, and yes, I'm talking in financial, as well as emotional terms. Supporting artists to make work, and to disseminate it as widely as possible, is fundamental.

Over the last years, working with indigenous friends, colleagues and communities, I've observed, and I think, absorbed a bit. I speak with no authority about indigenous cultures, but I notice that my indigenous friends talk about belonging to land, not owning it. Song, story, culture, family, place, language, spirit, ancestors, all are linked. Art is not separate from life. It is central to it. Music is not territory to be fought over.

I wonder what might happen if we started to listen to, and to think more like, our indigenous friends. To hear music as ephemeral and essential. Music as something to be shared, not owned.

MUSIC: *Before* (Lou Bennett, John O'Donnell, John Rodgers, Genevieve Lacey, commissioned by Black Arm Band)

Peggy Glanville-Hicks was a voracious listener and reader. Her attentiveness to the creative currents of the time, her conversations with colleagues, her hands on work as an artistic administrator, and her own work as a composer, all shaped her ideas about what music might be. Gradually, she developed and articulated – both in music and words – a personal musical philosophy.

In response, I'd like to present one of my own. Mine is not about a compositional language, it's more about how we might see art and artists in our society. I've drawn on the thoughts and words of a range of thinkers from many fields and times, to help frame this as broadly as possible.

I see art as research

A way of grappling with essential, life-defining questions –

Who are we?

Who do we want to become?

This kind of research requires daily work, beautifully honed skills, exquisite care and sensitivity, huge integrity and intelligence.

Any research involves long periods of not knowing. The pursuit of art is in many ways, about learning to be comfortable with uncertainty.

This research demands that we take risks. Taking risks means we will fail. From failing, we give ourselves the chance to learn, to try again, to refine further, and to understand more.

Living without risk severely limits what you allow yourself to know.

Art calls us to be brave.

Art is essential research into the human condition.

In the words of Joseph Campbell:

People say that artists are seeking a meaning for life ... I think that what we're seeking is an expression for the experience of being alive, so that we actually feel the rapture of life.

I see art as healing

Giving us much needed dreaming space

Giving us time for reflection

Giving us solace

Giving us hope

Giving us a way to come together, to honour and sustain what we have in common.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes notes:

Art is not just for oneself, not just a marker of one's own understanding. It is also a map for those who follow after us.

I see art as celebration

Of beauty in its many forms.

Of human generosity and resilience.

As an artist, your greatest asset is what you are prepared to give.

Friedrich Nietzsche says:

The essence of all beautiful art, all great art, is gratitude.

I see art as subversion

A musician creates a life out of honouring something that is intangible, and in our current world, that is a rare pursuit.

This provides a gentle, radical form of leadership.

Oscar Wilde:

No great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist.

I see art as alchemy

For musicians, this rarely happens in a practice room. It happens only in the presence of an audience.

Through extreme temperatures of desire and yearning, the ordinary stuff of our lives is fired into moments of grace and sustenance.

Robert Browning:

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?

I see artists as explorers

Many artists are motivated by a need to question.

The process of this is risky, uncertain, and remains so.

Thomas Merton:

You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognise the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage and hope.

MUSIC: My Island Home John Rodgers after Neil Murray (The Warumpi Band)

I feel that art has something to do with the achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos. A stillness which characterises prayer too, and the eye of the storm. I think that art has something to do with an arrest of attention in the midst of distraction.

Saul Bellow

How do we find this stillness, cultivate places and practices of deep listening? How do we take care of our community of artists and listeners, and by doing that, take care of our artform? It seems to me that taking care is at the heart of what we need to do. Taking care of one another and the environment we inhabit together. Listening. Supporting. Imagining ways forward. Encouraging one another to find them. Searching together for the elusive, the ephemeral, and the essential. And then, being endlessly inventive, courageous and tenacious, in bringing this to life.

I think back to Peggy Glanville-Hicks, and her tireless work as an advocate for other people, her generosity to her colleagues, and her lifelong commitment to her own creativity and craft. She was deeply serious about music. Through financial poverty, precarious physical health, huge professional challenges and disappointments, and a personal life that was far from straightforward, she nurtured her faith in music, and made a life out of a commitment to that. She made links across places and generations, across art forms and cultures. Her intellect and curiosity had insatiable appetites, extending well beyond music. She was optimistic, wily, resilient, opinionated, entrepreneurial, ambitious, confident, feisty, intense, sometimes abrasive, sometimes fearful, sometimes outraged, sometimes devastated, often so far ahead of her time that others simply couldn't keep up. She was daring and charming, she alienated people, she

burnt bridges, she had long, deep friendships and a fantastic persuasive ability, thanks to her intelligence, her wit, her passion, and the kind of charisma that heartfelt convictions and serious talent can command.

In her opening address as director of the Composers' Forum in New York, Glanville-Hicks noted:

We must embrace a notion that the creating of channels of opportunity for the creative musician is a privilege, a duty and a challenge of vital importance, and one of perpetually recurring pressure and need in each generation.

When I find myself talking in similar terms, some of my friends and colleagues respond by saying: "Please – I'm not an activist. I'm not a writer or public speaker. I'm not a salesperson. My job is not community work or pastoral care. I just want to make music."

I understand that. Being a musician demands time. Slow, faltering, working in the dark, chipping away at craft, clumsily stumbling towards an idea, feeling sick with anxiety over questions of meaning, dealing purely with sound-kinds of times, as well as times of elation, of flow, of bliss, of sheer unbridled joy and relief, of immense gratitude. Carving out, holding, nurturing this precious time to listen, read, write, play is our work. But for me, and it seems, for Glanville-Hicks, this is only part of our work.

Our continent is huge. Scarcity mentalities seem hardly necessary. There is space here, ample space for many stories, many tellers, and many listeners.

The province of music is even larger than the province of our continent – it's boundless. There are so many ways to make a meaningful life where music plays a central role.

When we come together to listen, let's remember that the act of sitting quietly as a group and listening without ego has the potential to be a life changing, life affirming experience. Together, we are tapping into something ancient and important.

When we think about making music, let's think about how to create communities of listeners around our work. It is these communities that will sustain us, and our artistic practice.

When we think about success, let's not just define it in terms of money, or profile. Success need not mean simply increase in cash or audience sizes. Success can be a much less obvious, much more long-reaching, stealthy thing. It can be allied to meaning, to care, to hope, to change, to possibility.

When we speak of profit, let's not just limit our terms to financial profit. Let's see profit also as an ability to carry on creating work, money as a transfer of energy that allows time and space to listen, to make and to communicate to our best ability.

I'm not pretending that finances and politics have no part in our discussions. I'm not pretending that art is a pure space, separate from the sordid concerns of the world. On the contrary. I'm just asking that when we think about the role of the arts and artists in our society, we encourage our visionary selves, as well as our canniest, most strategic selves. Both are necessary in order for us, and for music to flourish.

Let's define any of our terms, any of our frames of reference in the broadest sense. Let's aspire to become more generous, more open, and more supportive. Let's try to embody the biggest possible vision we can hold for ourselves, in whatever our role may be. Let's link our own work with other people and allow our collective spaces to constantly expand and deepen.

Let's never forget the specifics, the details, and give them the care and attention they need and deserve. But let's try also to take a long view, a wide view, a view that gives room for change, for difference, for uncertainty, for conflict as well as harmony. Let's try to begin discussions, and to make decisions – even about small things – out of a perspective that takes in the most expansive definition of what music can be, and what role we can play in the long, long story of that.

I know you know all this, but it feels important to say it in a public way, not as a polemic, but as a quietly spoken, heartfelt affirmation that we are all in this together, that our love for music, and by definition then, for listening to one another, makes us privileged and powerful beyond what we often realise.

When we think about music, and our lives with it, let's remember our indigenous friends, and their idea that music, land, story, are not for owning, but for sharing.

Musicians are consummate listeners. Being deeply attentive, hearing complexity, and noticing subtlety are not just professional music practices, but tenets for living. Learning to listen has radical potential.

MUSIC: *Learning to Listen* (Genevieve Lacey)

Genevieve Lacey November 2013

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