

Polyphonic Listening

James Weeks

Aim

The aim is to become immersed and at one with your sound environment; to find yourself within it and it within you. It is nothing more than ‘immersive listening’, reached by a series of gradual steps – both a focusing-in and an opening-out.

Preparation

Immersion requires a calm and receptive state. Some preparatory steps, such as a breathing exercise, walking for a while, or a similar physical activity, can help to clear the mind.

Method

- Go to the place you have designated for listening. This should ideally be a natural site. A garden or urban park is as good as the countryside, forest, hills or coast.
- Stand or sit so you are comfortable, with eyes closed, and listen.

The sound environment you are in is polyphonic. Many sounds from many sources are reaching your ears from all around you. Each one of these is a part of the environment you are in: even sounds you may consider intrusive or disruptive are part of this polyphony.

- Let your attention be drawn to one sound/sound source. Listen only to this for a while, getting to know it. Describe to yourself its timbre and how it changes; notice its volume, its rises and falls in loudness; if an intermittent sound, how long each sound lasts and what gaps there are in between sounds; if a birdsong or call, what the different calls or songs are; if a single, unrepeated sound, how both its presence and its absence sounds against the rest of the environment; where the sound is in relation to you; etc.
- Then let your attention be drawn to another sound, and repeat the same listening process with this sound.
- Continue with all the sounds you can hear in the environment, giving due attention to each in turn. As you listen, let yourself enjoy the sound sensually for itself; let it become part of you as it enters your ears.
- When you have listened to two or more sounds in turn like this, you can begin to listen polyphonically by combining two or more sounds together and listening to the way they interact sonically.
- Finally, when you have listened to all sounds individually, combine all together into the full soundscape. You will be hearing the same things as before, but now in a connected way, immersed in the sound environment.
- Listen for as long as you like.

Extension

Follow the steps above, recording yourself on a voice memo app or other recording device. As you listen to each sound, describe it, speaking quietly directly into the device. Describe it in any way you wish, using analytical or poetic language as desired. Leave plenty of pauses for listening.