

The Anatomy of Listening

Proposals are invited for presentations to a weekend Colloquium on the topic of Listening to Music: The Anatomy of Listening to be held at the Centre for Music Technology, University of Glasgow on June 13 and 14, 2009.

Presentations may be of up to 30 minutes (20 minutes plus 10 minutes for discussion) on any specific subject which falls within this field. Proposals from musicians, scholars or scientists (including postgraduate students) in any discipline are welcome. Please send proposals to Prof Graham Hair, Centre for Music Technology, Rankine Building, Glasgow University, Oakfield Avenue, Glasgow, G12 8LT or (preferably) email them to him at graham@n-ism.org by May 31st, 2009.

Contributors may address aspects of 'listening to music' from the perspective of their own disciplines, or propose dialogue with disciplines whose insights might provoke them to see their own work from new perspectives or in a broader context.

The Colloquium is funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and the associated performances by the Performing Rights Society Foundation and the Scottish Arts Council. The weekend will include invited presentations from speakers and performers including:

- The Edinburgh Quartet
- Martin Jones (pianist)
- Jane Manning (singer)
- Aaron Williamson (Director of the Centre for Performance Science, Royal College of Music)
- Ingrid Pearson (Graduate School, Royal College of Music)
- Amanda Bayley (University of Wolverhampton)
- Carola Boehm (Centre for Contemporary Arts, Manchester Metropolitan University)
- Prof Roger Watt (Stirling University)
- Sandra Quinn (Nottingham University)
- Prof Bruce Mahin (Radford University, Virginia)

Registration for the Colloquium is free. Travel and accommodation subsidies may be provided for selected delegates, especially graduate students. For details contact Professor Hair as above.

“Music demands more from a listener.....some preparation, some effort.....some clarification of the ears and sharpening of the instincts. It demands as much effort on the listener's part as the other two corners of the.....holy triangle of composer, performer and listener.” The words are Benjamin Britten's, from his 1964 acceptance speech upon being awarded the first Aspen Award. Nevertheless, there is no entry in The New Grove under 'Listening' or 'Listener' (nor under 'Composition', 'Composer', 'Performance' or 'Performer'). Perhaps the assumption is that these topics are simply matters of common understanding, or subsumed under more important topics? On the other hand, the Wikipedia entry on music covers all of these topics and more, including the following: “The field of music cognition involves the study of many aspects of music including how it is processed by listeners.....to uncover these complex mental processes involved in listening to music, which may seem intuitively simple, yet are vastly intricate and complex.”

It seems that from some perspectives, listening to music is just too simple for words, but from others so complicated that we still know little about it.

The Open University curriculum begins with a course on Listening to Music. The prospectus begins: “How do you listen to music? Through an exciting and diverse array of musical examples, this short course introduces you to new ways of listening to music and offers a guide to the principles of perceptive listening. Perceptive listening is a key competency that is central to several areas of the general music curriculum: analysis; stylistic and historical awareness; orchestration; composition; performance; and music engineering”.

As this outline implies, music has engaged the interest of many different communities, and the study of music has been pursued from many different viewpoints. Listening to music informs what practitioners do, and understanding better what listening to music entails may help us to elucidate music’s nature, extent and limits. Surprisingly, musicians, scholars and scientists are rarely brought together to discuss this topic. One way of considering ‘listening to music’ is of course to consider the relationship of ‘music as listened to’ with other manifestations of music (scores, audiofiles etc), music as an artefact of human culture with music as an empirically-measurable phenomenon, e.g. the relationship between listening and ‘machine listening’, *inter alia*.

The Prospectus for the 2006 Cambridge University Colloquium on Listening proclaimed: “There are some fields in historical musicology that have never really taken off. Perhaps the most conspicuous one is listening, a subject that has eluded historical description persistently and deeply frustrated generations of music historians.”

A Science Daily article in August 2008 asserted: “The common view among music scientists is that musical abilities are shaped mostly by intense musical training, and that they remain rather rough in untrained listeners, the so-called Expertise hypothesis. However, a University of Amsterdam study shows that listeners without formal musical training, but with sufficient exposure to a certain musical idiom (the Exposure hypothesis), perform similarly in a musical task when compared to formally trained listeners.....the study provides evidence for the idea that some musical capabilities are acquired through mere exposure to music. Just listen and learn!

Proposals may address any topic suggested by the above, or others.
