

Title	Relaxed Concentration
Conversationalist	Ying-Hsueh Chen
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Context	As part of launching a Listening Club at SPOR Festival 2023 we had the opportunity to meet and talk about her listening practice.
Note for conversation	We sat in an early and very warm spring sun, part conversing, part listening to the loud sounds from surrounding construction sites.

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- **Lukas Quist Lund:** []

Ying-Hsueh Chen []

- []

I think I'm most interested in natural phenomena, so music that you don't need education for. I'm not interested in music which is very niche, []

- Intuitively.

Intuitively, like breathing sounds, everybody can relate to that.

- []

[] I want the result to be universal, all kinds of people, old, young, kids, musicians or not. They can all enjoy something that's immediate. That's my practice.

- []

I mean, that's not possible, [] but my aim is for a general audience, without being mainstream.

- [] another thing is how everybody is or can be affected by it. That affection is almost unavoidable.

[

]

- [

] how do you then

relate to listening? [

]

Yes, listening practice, that's very interesting, and also broad and narrow and everything.

- In many ways it's like an unfair question.

Yes. [

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- [

]

That's also like... how does it feel? It depends on what's going on. But just talking with you now... listening... it makes me like, okay, I'm here now. It's like a tool, you can say it's a tool of being back to where I am. [

] It brings me somewhere else, it also brings me here. Now

I listen to that [Ying-Hsueh points]

- [

]

Yes, it's bringing me somewhere else, I know. It's bringing me to somewhere else, I don't know, I know. It's also bringing me to the present.

[someone walks past and we say hi]

- [

]

I think it's very paradoxical, it's like some kind of relaxed concentration.

- []

Is that strange to say?

- []

Yeah, listening, it's a paradox.

- []

It's actually very interesting to talk about because I don't really think about how I feel. It's just something I've been doing for so many years, everybody has been doing their own practice of listening within their method for years and we don't really think about it. But it's like relaxed concentration I guess. Like to let go of all those expectations of being present and being relaxed at the same time. It takes some practice actually.

- []

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[

] before I was a percussionist, I was trained as a dancer, also ballet, [] you are often confronted with some things you cannot do yet. And you want to do it, but you don't have the technique for it. And so

that's sort of the starting point of relaxed concentration, because you cannot overcome the technical difficulties. So you have to practice, then you let go at some point. I don't know if it's the same with listening, though.

- [] it's like in the beginning I'm listening to something that I'm already aware of, something that I have practiced listening to, using my techniques of habits. But then if I want to actually listen to my friends, what the person is actually saying, also the parts that I might not understand, and which is difficult for me to relate to, then I have to find this relaxed way to lean into it, or learn myself a new thing. I don't know. []

True, because some pieces I hate. Actually, I like it now, because I have another way of listening. It's a kind of cultural thing, another time.

- [] advice on how to concentrate in a relaxed way. Like how to do it, how to train yourself to concentrate in a relaxed way?

[long pause for thinking]

- How did you learn how to do it?

It's about body learning, because in a way you can say I'm sort of an athlete. So now I think back about overcoming technical difficulties. It's like you have to give it a chance for a longer time, until you feel like... ah, it's there. But with listening, it's very difficult to give advice, because it's so personal. Because I don't think about it.

- [] that listening is this very difficult skill to learn, but at the same time many different people are very good at it, but in many different ways. And I'm just so curious about if I can learn from all these different ways of doing it, because I know my own practice, but then I'm confronted that it's actually difficult for me to talk to other people about how

I do it and learn from each other. [

] or at least fail in a beautiful way, I don't know.

[]

- You don't have to answer, but [

]

[pause for thinking]

Well, I can tell you maybe indirectly. I wouldn't say I created this method, but when I teach small kids and they have trouble sitting down, what works immediately for them is to... I will instruct them to play a very steady tempo. For example, a woodblock or a drum is very good, or a Buddhist woodblock is a very calming sound. Not the high woodblock, but... And at the same time, you do that for 20 minutes, but they tell me about like 30 things they have heard during that time. So that... And it's very interesting. I can see they are drawn into a world, like now suddenly they hear that and that and that bird, and then somebody is stepping upstairs, and then they are doing... At the same time, being aware of the... Having to be aware of the hands. So it's really broad... Yeah, that's maybe something broad... Like you widen your perspective.

- Yeah, from this very concentrated little action, and from there you expand.

And then that's... And often that kind of lesson I can really see is rewarding for me to see the kids. And also for me, like how that... Just that is very simple. Just gong, gong, gong, gong. And they can... They open up to many things. Even their heart beats like... Because they couldn't find anything more, then they start to tune in themselves. And so I think that's a very beautiful thing. So I think the broader... Like you are relaxed. You are not listening to a certain thing, but you are listening to...

- [] this is like a practice where we first focus. We narrow our mind, and we find one spot in which we just...

Pivot point.

- [] we find that sweet spot, and then from there our relaxations can start. [] all what we could do, and all what we knew before, was all put into one task. Into concentration. Or listening. We used everything we could for that one little thing. And because we used everything we had, new things were allowed to appear, or experienced.

[] I'm not concerned about technique. Just do it.
Then another world opens. So that could be one of the answers.

- []

[

]

- [] if the idea is just to have this concentration, it's like finding this simple way of doing it that responds to something we can all participate in. [

] Because when that happens, then the listening is allowed.

I think a lot of contemporary music works are niche because they start with something...

Like really, you have to train your ear hard. It's very difficult, [

] it's difficult for the audience to relate to.

- Because they needed a lot of knowledge or context [

] It either responds to me, it

resonates or it doesn't. It's very natural for me. Because I don't know anything else.

[

] do you think that difficulties around

listening is a good thing? That listening becomes this uneasy mystery that is hard to explain to others?

I don't know if it's a good thing. It's a natural thing. It's also very strange that we can see things. It's strange because it's a mystery. We can taste things. Why can we taste? It's very strange. It's a mystery. [

]

- For them it's maybe like a pleasure.

I don't know. So it's a very personal thing. I also don't like overly loud music, even though I'm a percussionist. But some people actually like it. So I think there are allergic reactions. Different kinds of allergic reactions. You cannot really remove and change that.

- [

] It's a relational thing. [

] because it's not something we can just

turn on and off. It is something that we create together. And I have to be very sensible

to you, not to misuse your listening to me. []

[

]

- []

[

] It's a difficult piece for me to perform, because I have to wear ear protection, and I break instruments after the performance. [

]

- Do you have a special relationship with your instruments?

[]

- []

I'm actually, at this moment, I'm very interested in creating music, of, or for, just one element. For example, [

] You don't hear a concert

with only bones nowadays. But our ancestors did, [

] they cleaned it and played on it. And

just finding thousands of different songs in one instrument, [

] So my instruments have

become more broad, like a plank, like a tree plank. [

] Yes, I have.

- But I also ask because I just noticed how... And maybe I was just sitting with my elbows down into the table, but you were touching the wood softly.

[]

- [] all your movement was very aware of the material of the objects. [

] discovering things within them that you didn't know. [

] well, what is a table? This table is just flat, so I can put my elbows on it. And I was not interested in discovering the wood.

[

]

- []

Yeah, it's a very beautiful sound, actually. [knocking on the wood table] Yeah, that's a beautiful sound. And you can make a concert just out of this, actually.

- []

[]

- [] can I find a thousand different sounds in a bone? For me, that is listening.

[] It's like you do that, and instead of just banging on things...

- [] a premise of there being something here to discover. I don't know what it is, but that's the case of the world. There's something I don't know, and if I search for it, if I really concentrate, if I'm invested in the bone, I will discover, maybe new sounds. And for me, I think that's listening.

Yeah, that's listening. I also want to make my future concerts, I would like to focus on a concert just with wind. But I don't know how to do it [

] And the water, that's also interesting. Actually, I think that's closer to what our ancestors did before all this modern technology, when they had all the time.

- [

]

[

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- [

]

Compose the wind.

- [

] That we accept that we don't control certain things and we then lean into them, or we're curious about them. [

] I feel that I'm not really in control. A little bit like with the kids. [

]

Yeah.

- Is there something about listening that scares you?

Scares me? You mean like... What do you mean? Like, for example?

- []

Yeah, like something that scares me. You mean some kind of sound that scares me?

- []

I cannot really come with anything. [

] I just walk away. []

- []

That's scary.

- But it's also nice that listening might be a practice that we're not scared of or in?

[]

- []

[

]

- []

I wouldn't say it's scary, but it's a gift and a handicap at the same time, because I hear pitching, all kinds of stuff. And this year I am trying to unlearn it.

- []

But I try to unlearn it.

- How do you unlearn it?

Listen to... Yeah, there's something that's interesting because I'm classically trained. I was not listening so much to overtone. So I was very concentrated on the pitch, but not things around it like the quality or overtones around it. []

- Maybe because they did not have perfect pitch.

Yeah, yeah, exactly. So to let go of that was a little bit scary. Really listening to several tones, the quality of the gong or something, it came quite late to me because I was very stuck with this pitch thing. Then I became able to improvise better because I was not in this narrow focus.

- []

No, it's not true. [] You can become a little bit handicapped if you are not listening broadly.

- []

The concert at 9 o'clock yesterday?

- []

[]

- []

] listening outside of
sound? As more than registering sounds. In what way is listening also something else?

Hmm... This is a deep question. Yeah, yeah. Outside of listening.

- [] your idea of listening as this relaxed
concentration. In what way does that apply to more than just []?

Well, I can only answer that it's maybe the same with visions. Like understanding abstract art
is about relaxing your eyes. I mean, it also came late to me, this abstraction. [

] I wanted to see things I already know. [

] Maybe they were just drawing the energy of the hand []

- []

Yeah, I mean, you can feel the hands. So how do you draw that? So it's... I can answer in the
way that it applies with all senses, I think. []

- []
] how much our lungs and the water in our stomachs is
also part of the listening experience. And depending on what you're wearing on your
feet, different vibrations go up through your body. [

] cannot grasp how many things influence my ability to register
the music or other sensuous experiences. []

let go and relax and just in a different way accept that I cannot comprehend, that
there's so much more going on [

] I just have to take it in, this relaxed way.

Yeah. I'm still learning that, it's a mystery. It's difficult to put into words.

- []

But in athletic training or musical training, we talk about playing from the stomach, from *hara* ["center of power" in Japanese], from the center of the body. [] you cannot really put it into words. You cannot teach other people how to listen from *hara*, I mean how to play from the center. It's very difficult to pass it on, but it's a state where you play in a certain way like, oh, that was effortless but very powerful, and that's from the heart, but it's difficult to pass the knowledge, how to do it.

- []
] And how can we then still stay with that? How can we just accept that? And I think that's the lesson. Maybe not answering how, but just accepting that there is no how. []

[]

- Yeah, but it's without words. []

[]

- It's a beautiful thing. Because it makes me sort of, you know, vulnerable. [] It's like walking around in darkness, [] I have to sort of like open my arms and just be okay with moving around []

[]

- [

]

I think it's possible to speak words that come from the heart and stomach. I believe we're already sort of doing that.

- [

]

I don't know. I don't know how to answer that, but I... It's not a discovery, but all percussion musicians around the world, they all imitate the sound of... [makes musical example]

- The heart. The pulse.

Including hip-hop and Korean shaman music. And I also learned if you have to flake, inflint.

[Start a fire with stones. Some kind of imitation of heartbeat, like hammering things [gives other examples by hammering the table wood]. Like there's preparation. [continue to make music] Like you can... I'm just saying that... [

]

- But maybe there doesn't have to be an answer.

Concrete, yeah.

- I really enjoy it when there's no answer. Because why should there always be one?

But I'm just saying that we are always somehow imitating the sound of nature. Somehow it's instinct. [makes sounds imitating heart beats]

-

] learning the skill, but don't connect that skill with your center. [

]

[]

- [

] Like how is listening different when having a conversation?

[

] But I also listen to the... because I have to answer, so I listen somewhere... it's very abstract. I listen to somewhere inside of me to find the answer, like, ah, how, what are you saying...

- []

Yeah, many movements. Always.

- []

Or going inside to find the answer.

- []

Or searching the world for mystery, because it's a mystery. It's strange. Everybody can... we can see why.

- This is also a place with so many different noises, or sounds, that having a conversation in a more silent room is... what do you prefer? [

] having a conversation with a human

being, does that block out noises, because we then have this... a little bit like a heart beating, we have the focus point, or does it more make you aware of your surroundings? []

I think there's a skill of listening to many layers at the same time. Also, when you perform, it's a skill, to listen to everybody else while you're performing. So I think we are also... because, I mean, we are trained already to talk. And then being aware... things are just there. [makes different sounds] Unless it's something really allergic, like a sound like... [makes a surprising sound] Then you go like... Then you go like that [sharing another sound] []

- [] we all learn how to focus in the conversation.

It's a relaxed focus. You cannot have a conversation without relaxed focus. You cannot think about something like a... Tomorrow's deadline while having a genuine conversation. Yeah, having a conversation is the reason.

- []

] Is it something that we can learn? Is it something that we can choose? Like...

It's all of that. All of that, I think. It's a combination of all of that. We can choose also. []

] So, I don't know...

- Like searching for the sounds in a bone.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

- []

[] my students' homework was, they take a thunder drum home, and the next time they have to bring 30 sounds. [

] I don't know if it's education or whatever, but I mean, I'm trying to find a way to open up...

- []

[]

- And for some reason, you just rarely do it. But you can do it all the time, anywhere. It's just... it is the choice we have to make.

[]

- It's not a skill you learn, because you can just do it. But you just have to choose to do it.

[

] And it's also a skill to develop from that choice. If you choose not to do that, you will not...

- []

But it's also natural at the same time, because everybody can have like 30 sounds in one hand.

- [

]

Yeah, and then the brain gets some kind of... Like you're connected to somewhere.

- []

Ancient and like instinct. [

]

- []

Yeah, the little stuff is like the whole world.

- [

] maybe it's like something we

respond to as a child.

[] I just need some water.

- []

Small things, tiny things open up the whole world. So concentrate on the world. [

]

- []