

## Teaching Contemplative Listening in an Age of Sonic Overload

Eric Somers

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Although the term *spiritual* can mean different things in the academic world, especially if one considers secular forms of the spiritual along with more traditional religious interpretations, few scholars would deny that spiritual understanding must entail some mode of contemplative thinking.

Music certainly has a long tradition of being used as an aid to contemplative modes of thinking, but the kind of music usually associated with college youth—popular music forms currently in vogue—is primarily focused on the kinesthetic and sexual nature of youth. Young people have a high energy level, which is often expressed in dancing and other activities requiring music “with a beat.” In addition, there is a way that music serves to lubricate the process of meeting other people to whom one has a romantic and physical attraction. These kinds of music—rock and roll, hip-hop, techno, etc.—are hardly contemplative.

The values of popular music—activity without deep thought; sensory overload (especially if music listening is combined with other activities); adherence to known musical formulas that don’t challenge one to hear or think in an individual way; and a sense that a “general idea” counts as understanding (after all, many young people cannot even understand all of the lyrics to some of the songs to which they regularly listen)—are not only not unfavorable to spirituality but are also barriers to serious intellectual study and critical thought. Encouraging contemplative listening as an art form creates more than spiritual awareness, it also can lead to the kind of thinking that will make a student successful and innovative in the classroom.

For one who teaches sound recording and electronic music composition, the need for students to listen with discernment is especially important. Thus it has been a key mission of my teaching to introduce students to the art of contemplative listening. Although this has been in the context of courses in sound-recording techniques and sound composition, I have no illusions that even many, much

less most, of these students will make their careers as recording engineers, producers, or sound composers. But knowing how to listen contemplatively will bring understanding through hearing in a way that goes beyond simple musical enjoyment.

The process of learning contemplative listening in my classes takes three forms. The first is learning to appreciate compositions of sound art, which requires concentration and reflection. Second is listening to individual sounds, recording them, and learning to describe their characteristics. Finally, the process of listening shifts to one of creation as I teach students to use individual sounds to create simple sound compositions. In this way students learn to let the materials of sound guide them to original sound structures and designs, almost the reverse of traditional musical composition in which one tries to compose a piece by filling in notes according to a preset structure (whether one of classical, pop, hip-hop or jazz music).

### Appreciating sound art

The kinds of sound art that I think are most useful to contemplative listening can fit into four basic categories:

1. Extreme minimalism
2. Compositions having highly repetitive or sustained forms
3. Lowercase sound art
4. Soundscape art

Extreme minimalism often produces the same kind of disbelief in the listener that extreme minimalism in the visual arts does to the viewer. Who hasn't looked at a canvas painted nearly solid black and thought, "What is this painter trying to put over on the public?" Similarly, when students first hear a piece such as *KATO* by Zoltan Jeney, in which the two notes are permuted on the organ over a period of 25 minutes, there is at first a sense that this must be a kind of joke, especially since a computer could be programmed to play the notes *ad infinitum*. But this opens up discussion about how a computer-sequenced performance might sound in comparison to the subtle differences that cannot be eliminated when a human player tries to perform as regularly as a computer. The students come to understand that the "music" of *KATO* is not the notes themselves but the subtle irregularities produced by trying to play without irregularity.

This insight might make a student look differently, also, at the “graph paper” paintings of Agnes Martin, work that is often described as “spiritual” in art history books and in the artist’s own writings. Certainly other composers of extreme minimalism who also generate discussion include LaMonte Young (who works with extremely sustained drones), Phil Niblock (who works with sustained note clusters), and Tony Conrad (who worked with LaMonte Young in the early days).

An extension of extreme minimalism is work consisting of lengthy repetition of certain music elements, usually with some small development and/or variation. My own awareness of my love for this kind of music came in college when I first encountered the *Saint Matthew Passion* of Orlando di Lasso. This work, which filled both sides of the standard LP recording I owned, is really one long single motet. Yet it had a hypnotic and spiritual effect that seemed to transcend, for me, the impact of the highly dramatic *Saint Matthew Passion* of J.S. Bach.

The repetitive piece I like to introduce to students is Gavin Bryar’s *The Sinking of the Titanic*. The basic tune for this work is a repetitive playing, by string quartet, of a well-known Anglican hymn tune reputed to have been played by the *Titanic*’s dance orchestra as the ship was sinking. The work also combines sounds of the ship itself recorded during the much more recent recovery efforts to collect artifacts from the ship, a montage of recorded sounds from other performances of the work. It lasts about one hour. I warn students about the length and about the repetition, but ask them to listen carefully. They are told not to read, write, sleep or do other activities that would distract them from the music. The music is an exercise in “getting lost” within sonic repetition and seeing what effect this has on one’s learning to focus one’s mind. It is really a kind of musically enhanced Quaker meeting with some of the same expected results that Quakers expect from their form of worship.

Whenever I get frustrated because students are not paying close attention in class or when I tire of hearing student cars drive by that appear to be powered not by internal-combustion engines but by “rap” engines chugging out the beat at a high decibel level, I remind myself of the delightful [mailing list](#), popular with a number of young

people, known as “lowercase sound.” By its own description (from a limited-edition sampler) lowercase sound is this moment of pure attention in which one’s sense of self simultaneously disappears and swells to encompass the surroundings. By composing for this type of listening, these artists force the listener to pay focused attention to sound. After a couple of times through this set you may discover for yourself that composition is all around you at every moment—the hum of the refrigerator, the refuse truck backing up in the alley, a plastic bag trapped in the fence rustling.... “The only thing that is not art is inattention,” said Marcel Duchamp, “and now you are paying attention.”

Many of the composers of lowercase sound might better be termed “sound artists” than “composers” in the traditional music sense. Sound accidents, sound that is barely perceptible, and found sounds are all an important part of this movement of (mostly) young people who like to listen carefully even to the quietest of sounds. Indeed, Fernando Lopez once submitted a CD of his “compositions” for pressing that was recorded at such a low level that the master was returned to him by the pressing company with a letter explaining that something must have gone wrong when he tried to produce his master, that he appeared to have submitted a CD containing no sound!

One of the delights for me of lowercase sound composition is that when one listens at home, often one is not sure which sounds are on the recording and which are sounds filtering in from the outside or are produced inside by various appliances. By learning to listen to lowercase sound, one starts to appreciate the found music all around. I used to always wear a Walkman minidisc player or radio when out striding for exercise. But the more I got into lowercase sound the more I found that I preferred listening to the music provided by the environment around me. Even sounds that used to seem annoying and all the same—cars passing, for example—have begun to take on new meanings as I learn to hear each different car sound as an individual sonic mini-composition based on the same grand automotive theme. I was at a meeting last winter during which the steam radiators started making such interesting polyrhythmic sounds I completely tuned out of the discussion for a few minutes just to enjoy and savor the natural music of the room. (How I wished I had

been carrying my minidisc recorder.) Later, when I talked to others at the meeting about how interesting the sound had been, I found that most totally “tuned out” the radiators and had no recollection of hearing anything from them, much less anything musically interesting.

A genre of sound art closely related to listening to one’s environment is the soundscape. Artists working in this medium usually try to document a particular environment by recording sonic elements of the environment. Some further create sound collages—soundscape compositions—by recombining the individual recorded elements in some meaningful way. Some of the most famous of these artists are Claude Shryer, Hildegard Westerkamp, Dan Lander, and many others. This form has become especially popular in Canada, thus many of its best-known practitioners are Canadian. I once tried to start off a beginning recording class with soundscape composition, but found that it works best to introduce students to the sonic art forms mentioned above first, or else they don’t realize that their own sonic environments are rich enough to have anything worth recording. They simply tune out interesting sounds (like the people at the committee meeting). Indeed, rather than supporting listening with discernment, I sometimes feel that colleges and universities contribute to the problem.

So many people are used to being surrounded by sound these days—whether the sound of heating and mechanical systems that have not been properly soundproofed, the sound of recorded “background” music in a restaurant or office, the sound of a radio or TV on but ignored, or the sounds of others in the room talking or making noise—that people stop thinking about or even noticing sound. Thus noise pollution is largely a nonissue even among people highly concerned with other quality-of-life issues, and many of my students can’t figure out why I find even small sounds distracting while I am trying to lecture. There are organizations, such as the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, that are concerned with these issues, but these organizations do not get much media coverage compared with other environmental groups. Indeed, universities that claim to be at the cutting edge of social issues concerning health and the environment continue to sponsor rock and hip-hop concerts for their students at which the music is played at a sound pressure level known to cause permanent ear damage—levels that would be

outlawed in the workplace without hearing protectors being provided. How can we expect our students to be discerning and contemplative listeners if we deafen them at college social functions?

### Recording and creation

One would imagine that an ability to hear and listen carefully would be a prime prerequisite for taking the art of sound recording, yet I find that students planning to enter the field of sound recording often have to be taught to listen to sound. When recording a piece of music, the students tend to get involved in the music rather than in the whole sound and simply do not notice distortions, hums, and other distracting sounds (such instrument rattles, squeaky chairs, etc.). A similar problem occurs when teaching students photography. They get so involved with their main subject, they forget to see the picture as a frame containing an arrangement of elements but keep their eye focused only on the center portion of their image or on some other part of the image that interests them.

I mentioned above the problem of getting students to notice interesting sounds in their own environments. In order to help students to hear all of the sound around them, I give them a list of qualities (for example, “smooth,” “gritty,” “edgy,” etc.) and ask them to find and record sounds that they feel have those qualities. I emphasize that the qualities must be inherent in the sounds themselves and should not be based simply on the method of producing the sound. Thus a “sharp” sound is not necessarily the sound made by a knife cutting something. Indeed the sound of a knife slicing a tomato, for example, is usually a very soft, smooth sound, not one that would be characterized as “sharp.” Students start with easy terms (“smooth,” “flowing,” “hard”) and progress to ones that take considerable thought (“sexy,” “schizophrenic,” “grandiose”). Thus listening becomes contemplative and analytical. There may be many ideas about what quality a “frantic” sound might have, but it takes some thought, and some listening, to find a good example.

After the students have recorded a variety of differing sounds, and have produced quite extensive sound libraries, they then create sound compositions using these recorded sounds. These are not

unlike soundscape compositions except that they don't necessarily document a place or environment. They bear some resemblance to "musique concrète" compositions—in which sounds are tape-recorded then processed and edited to create a form of music—except that I do not encourage as much sound processing in early compositions as is usually done in musique concrète.

Although the sound compositions done by these students can be considered a form of music, they are not based on traditional musical forms of either popular or classical music. The use of repetitive loops do give some compositions a little of a techno feel. Indeed, we use loop composition software designed for dance music to create some of these pieces. Yet other compositions take on a totally different feel. Popular music, especially, is based on taking a basic format and simply making slight changes to a formula. Here I want students to let the music evolve from the sonic materials they have recorded, not be constructed to sound like something they listen to on the radio.

For more advanced projects I have students base their sound structures on the forms of a visual work of art. This was the topic of my talk at this conference two years ago. But even the process of semiotic transformation, of finding sound elements and structures to correspond to visual elements and structures, requires greater analytical and creative thinking than "styling" a new pop song using the current trendy formula.

### The evolution of the spiritual

After the initial disbelief that anyone listens to minimal music, long repetition, lowercase sound, or soundscape art, and after students endure the "impossible" tasks of finding sounds that correspond to particular qualities and constructing compositions using those sounds, it is pleasing to me that so many students take great pleasure in listening to the efforts of their classmates.

Each student assumes that his/her own work must be the worst submitted, a fear that at first seems substantiated when they hear fresh the work of another student after spending so long with their own material. But soon the students come to realize that the vast

majority of sound compositions created have something very interesting about them and each shows a very distinctive personality.

Are these results “spiritual”? If one means “religious” by that term, then perhaps not. But if one means that by careful listening and careful construction, one has uncovered sonic ideas related to oneself and to one’s environment that seemed hidden before undertaking this course of study, then one has to conclude that these listening and composing exercises have a deeply spiritual end.

None of this assumes that a student gives up any part of his/her youth culture and its own popular music. But my course seems to help students realize that the sound world is much larger than the subset that is popular music. Judging by the number of students who ask about the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, the lowercase sound internet list, and the labels and ID numbers of musical samples played in class, I would say that minds are being opened to listening as a spiritual experience.

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

(This is by no means a detailed discography, but rather a few of my favorite discs in each category that can be used as a starting point in exploring contemplative listening.)

##### Extreme Minimalism

Alvin Lucier, Bjorn Nilsson, Zoltan Jeny, With a Minimum of Means,  
Tony Conrad, Early Minimalism (4 CD set) Arsenic 74.9216  
Ernstalbrecht Stiebler, Three in One, Hat Art CD 6169

##### Pieces having repetitive or sustained forms

Elaine Radigue, Trilogie de la Mort, (2 Cd set) XI discs, XI 119  
Gavin Bryars, The Sinking of the Titanic, Point music 446-061-2  
Philip Glass, Music in Twelve Parts, Virgin Records 91311-2

##### Lowercase Sound

The best compact example is the lowercase sound compilation (2 CD set). This was originally released in a limited edition of only 500



copies (which is probably sold out by now) though a second compilation is due out. See [www.lowercasesound.com](http://www.lowercasesound.com).

John Duncan, Bernhard Gunter, Home, Unspeakable, Trente Oiseaux TOC 964

Francisco Lopez, Warszawa Restaurant, Trente Oiseaux, TOC 951

#### Soundscape compositions

Claude Schryer, Autour, empreintes DIGITALes, IMED 9736

Hildegard Westerkamp, Transformations, empreintes DIGITALes IMED 9631

Dan Lander, Zoo, empreintes DIGITALes IMED-9526-CD

#### Musique Concrete and other sound compositions from recorded sound

Misc. artists, Electro Clips a la carte, empreintes DIGITALes IMED-9004-CD (a collection of short compositions by many artists)