

Noisy Silence, and Silent Noises

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Editorial

In psychotherapy silence is often experienced as the noisiest of moments. Moments of quiet in the room afford an anticipatory bubbling of thought to arise - a search for solutions, or maybe a simple anxiety about who will say what next? In general life too these 'quiet' moments may quite ironically provide opportunity for our minds to accelerate, to fill the void with the grind of their own machinery. Peace and quiet often are not the charming friends we all hoped for. Cognition is noisy and a silent moment in space-time grants it considerable space to increase in perceived volume.

Emerging in recent decades however psychotherapy has cultivated an increasing integration of contemplative traditions that have historically sought to still, quiet and stabilize our noisy streams of consciousness. Primarily the domain of religion for millennia these now popularized approaches are often described under the umbrella term 'mindfulness'. Meditative techniques and associated practices cultivate an accepting, judicious awareness of thought and experience allied with an intention to direct the attentional state of one's mind to *something* in particular. This *something* may be the breathing cycle and the rising and falling of one's belly with each inbreath and outbreath. It could be the sensations of limbs in motion, or the pressure of alternate feet on the ground as we walk. Mindfulness practices are designed to grow one's capacity for directed attention to these stimuli, an awareness of our habitual distractors, and to do so with an attitude of warm acceptance.

Many mindfulness practitioners practice, at least in part, with awareness of sound, and for good reason. Sounds, and in particular music, afford a deep, rich experience that is inherently arresting in ways that, one might argue, an awareness of one's breathing or the soles of the feet seldom are. Sound floods awareness with its vibration and the detail inherent in even the most simple of music forms provides a plethora of observational content including melody, harmony, timbre and dynamics. Listened to with curiosity and interest music can create a profound silence of sorts in the mind, often replacing the noise and clatter of our own cognitive processes. Listening, for many, is a channel to a more spacious, less compressed mental state that is more observational than the direct, fused experience of our more habitual entanglement with thoughts. Moreover, we listen to music cognisant of its designed emotive effects and with an intention to watch our emotions rise and fall with the nuance of the music and the network of its associations in our minds. Music listening places us in observational

mode, alert to and accepting of emotion and experience as it arises within us [1].

Biomusicology, the study of the interface between body, mind and music is well placed to explore the manner in which music cultivates a more salutary, spacious mental state. We know that psychological distress and most psychological disorders are perpetuated by an unrelenting fusion with our fearful, gloomy, obsessive thinking and our capacity to judge much of our experience as unwanted. Music, powerfully, helps us to attend to inner experience, to notice how emotions rise and fall in response to motifs designed to move us and evoke particular waves of feeling within. Moreover, making music offers an absorption in sound, action and kinaesthetics that is profound and ancient. This is most definitely a powerful remedy for a troubled, burdened mind more used to focusing on painful contents of its own imagination and pertaining to simulated events past and future.

Indeed, looking further back into the process of making music instruments we find opportunity for mindfulness. Early man blew with curiosity into cylindrical animal bones and noticed flute-like sonorous qualities. Luthiers (builders of stringed instruments) are renowned for attention to the tonal qualities of wood and to the bracing patterns of soundboards that afford a desirable tap-tone long before a vibrating string is ever attached. The sonic qualities of materials and their potential for sound provides a welcome door into the here-and-now.

Sound is experienced as curves, textures, height, width, depth, even heat, feel, and taste. These synaesthetic properties invite a rich, multimodal experience that beckon participants into a deep experience with sound that often serves to silence the inner noise of planning, analyzing, wanting, wishing, judging and complaining. As biomusicology progresses it is important that we remember this stabilising feature of music and sound as we seek to help those burdened by thoughts and many associated feelings that hurt, discourage and damage. Hopefully research will seek to measure and document this process.

As we listen to music with intent we learn to allow thoughts to pass us by and that, I suggest, is a silence worth listening to.

References

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